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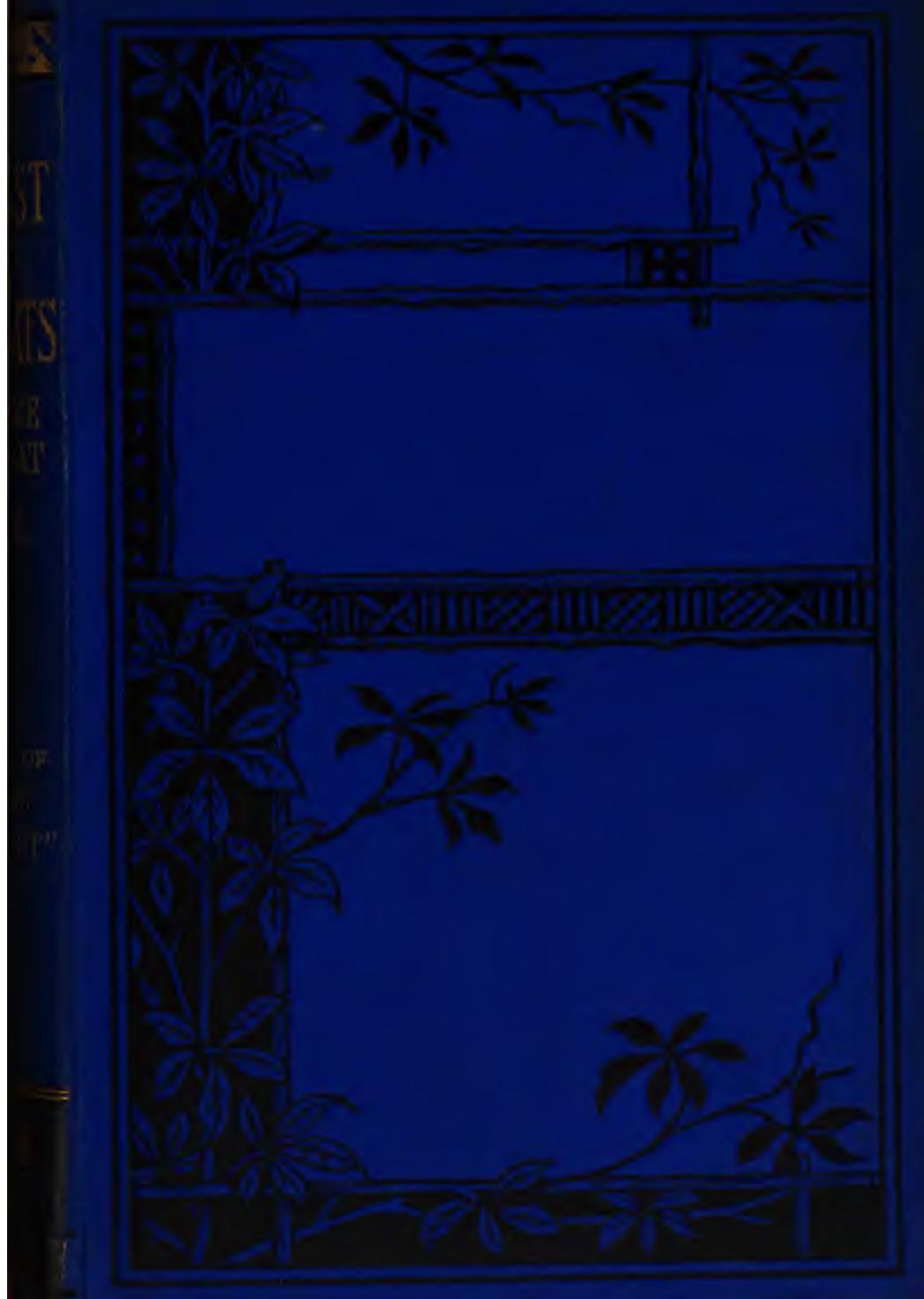
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A HARVEST OF WILD OATS.

1990

1990

A HARVEST OF WILD OATS.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

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OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

"THE TELL-TALE SHIRT"

"DUST IN CLARE'S EYES"

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"IREDELL TO THE RESCUE"

"ADDY BECOMES PIOUS"

"THE FRUIT AND FLOWERS"

"BERTHA'S CHARGE"

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A HARVEST OF WILD OATS.

CHAPTER I.

“THE TELL-TALE SHIRT.”

AS Clare runs up to her mother's room she thinks of that other night, a few weeks before her marriage with Iredell, when she was, in like manner, summoned there to receive an account of his manifold shortcomings.

She remembers it by force of contrast only, for she feels very differently on the subject now from what she did then. Special conferences solemnly called in Lady Brodhurst's dressing-room were not matters of rejoicing to Clare in her maiden days.

She has always loved her mother dearly, but hitherto her love has not been unmixed with fear. Now there is none. She is in her own house, free and independent of the opinion of all outsiders, even of Lady Brodhurst's—that makes a great difference. But there is a greater still. She belongs to Iredell, and Iredell belongs to her. Immutably and eternally they are each other's possession. No one can question the fact; no one can come between them. It is this thought that makes Clare enter her mother's presence with a quiet pulse and a cool head. Only in the next room is her hero, defiling the hangings of her chamber with wreaths of unholy smoke, ready to rush out and defend her at a moment's notice. If any word or look from Lady Brodhurst should wound or offend her, she has but to go to his arms for comfort and for rest. So she turns the handle of her mother's door without the least hurry, and takes a seat

by her dressing-table with an air of the utmost indifference.

“Do you wish to speak to me, dear mamma?”

“My child, I cannot sleep until I have explained to you the reason of my quitting the drawing-room so suddenly. I daresay you thought it strange—perhaps ill-bred. But I could not have stayed another minute in the same room with that woman to save my life.”

“O, mamma, I am so sorry! Which woman?”

“My dear! As if there could be any doubt about it! That creature who calls Colonel Iredell by his Christian name, of course. How she presumes to do it before your very face I cannot imagine.”

“What, Mrs. Seymour! Why she has called him so all her life, mamma, They have known each other from children.”

"I don't believe it!" says Lady Brodhurst, sharply.

"Not when Frank says so!" commences Clare, indignantly; but there she stops to consider whether Frank has said so. "Mamma, you are a regular infidel! Everybody in Woolwich knows how intimate Mrs. Seymour and Frank have been."

"I cast no doubt upon *that*, my dear!"

"Before we were married—before he ever knew me," goes on Clare, hurriedly, "they were like brother and sister together. She used to do all sorts of things for him in his bachelor days. She made him a set of shirts once with her own hands."

"That is nothing to her credit that I can see. I daresay she would make him another set now, if you were such a fool as to permit it."

"O, no; not now, of course!" replies Clare, slightly colouring; "but Frank

had no one to do anything for him in those days, you know.”

“Ladies of Mrs. Seymour’s stamp are not usually very particular as to whether their services are actually required or not. The way in which she leaned over Colonel Iredell and whispered in his ear was disgusting. It shocked me. I have never been accustomed to scenes of that description in my own sphere of society. And, in my opinion, Colonel Iredell has no right to allow it.”

Clare laughs.

“What is a man to do if a woman chooses to lean over him? He can hardly run away from her, and in his own house!”

“There is no need he should follow and encourage her to the neglect of his other guests. I don’t think he spoke two words to Mrs. Treherne the whole evening.”

Clare makes an affectation of yawning, and rises—

"Well, mamma dear, if you don't want me any more I think I'll go to bed—I am very tired."

"Of course, my dear Clare, directly Colonel Iredell's behaviour is called into question, you find some excuse for breaking off the conversation."

"Yes, mother, you are right, and I always shall. Loyalty alone to the master of the house would make me do so. But I love my husband with my whole heart and soul, and I don't believe he ever did anything wrong, nor ever will."

The words are uttered boldly. Lady Brodhurst has no refuge but in assent.

"Well, my darling, of course it's the proper thing for you to believe—but don't be *too* blind. That woman is a serpent. I saw it directly she entered the room. And she's worse than a serpent: she is bold and ill-bred. And if you don't hold your

own a little better, she'll bring you trouble yet—mark my words."

"O! I'm not afraid of Addy Seymour!" replies Clare, confidently. "She knows exactly how far she can go in this house. And it shall never be said that I turned a cold shoulder to those friends who were kind to my darling when he had no one to look after him."

She is too loyal—dear, faithful heart—even to tell Lady Brodhurst that Iredell has already expressed himself sick and tired of the intimacy with Mrs. Seymour, lest the effect of that should be to call his fidelity and gratitude into question, and to raise a doubt whether he ought still to profess what he has ceased to feel. So she injures her cause, in one respect, by a wish to keep up his character for honesty, and leaves her mother under the impression that Colonel Iredell approves of Mrs. Seymour's conduct towards himself and encourages it.

"Well, good night, my poor child, and may God bless you!" says Lady Brodhurst, as she kisses Clare slowly and solemnly on each cheek, and leaves an impression behind that she looks upon her as a poor innocent, trusting fool, who is being utterly hoodwinked by her libertine husband and his crafty and designing friend. There *is* a way of *not* saying a thing which is far more significant than putting it into words, and Lady Brodhurst possesses the art in perfection. Her accusations are mostly inuendoes; her reproaches, insinuations.

Clare dislikes this fighting in ambush, especially when it refers to her beloved Iredell. Her mother's hints and sighs rouse her into action. She goes to bed, angry and sore at what has passed between them, but determined not to let the matter drop there. She will force Lady Brodhurst to come out and fight on open ground, and if she has anything definite to say against

her husband, to say it. Frank puts some sleepy question to her when they meet again upon the subject of her mother's conversation, but she kisses away his curiosity, and the subject is not renewed between them. Yet so full is her mind of it, and so anxious is she to "have it out with mamma," that before Lady Brodhurst has left her bed the next morning Mrs. Iredell has danced up to the side of it, with a shirt flung over her arm.

"Now, mother, to prove to you what friends Mrs. Seymour and Frank are, and always have been, here is one of the set of shirts she made for him, two whole years ago, before he had even heard of my name. His own sister (if he had had one) couldn't have done more for him."

"Pull up the blind, my dear!" replies Lady Brodhurst, portentously.

Clare does as she is desired. Her mother

takes up the garment and examines it in silence.

It is made of the very finest white flannel, and elaborately embroidered over the bands in white silk.

“Humph!” says Lady Brodhurst, as she turns it over and over in her hands. “A vast amount of unnecessary trouble wasted on the manufacture of it, it appears to me!”

Clare’s eyes open.

“O, mamma! how could any one take too much trouble for Frank? I’m sure *I* couldn’t.”

“You are in love with him, my dear. This lady you say is not.”

“Of course she’s not!”

“Well, then, always supposing she must make his shirts herself (for which I can see no necessity, considering that any work-woman would have done it for her), there was no reason to put all this fuss and

embroidery upon them. Look at these gussets even! Where another woman would have strengthened them with a stitching of thread, she has ornamented them with white silk. Absurd!"

"Mamma, what eyes you have! I never noticed that."

"My dear, it is you who have no eyes. Anybody with half an eye could see this shirt was made for one of two things—love or money! Women are not quite so fond of their needles as to sit destroying their sight and wasting their time over a garment that no one is to see, unless they have some powerful reason for pleasing the wearer."

"Of course she wished to please him. She made him a present of six of them!"

"And all embroidered over the gussets and bands like this?"

"No; some are in blue silk, and some

in rose colour," replies Clare, laughing, though a little uneasily.

Lady Brodhurst almost screams—

"Took the trouble to change the colour of her silks, and embroider fine flannel like this, that is only fit to wrap round a new-born baby, for the use of a great hardy fellow who's been knocking over the world half his life, and then tell me she wasn't in love with him! Pooh! nonsense, my dear! You know nothing! You seemed so much in earnest yourself, last night, you almost made me believe I was mistaken; but if I had never seen Mrs. Seymour, that shirt would have told me what she was—a nasty, artful, designing intrigante, whom you ought never to have allowed inside your house! Why, the herring-boning alone must have taken her hours and hours to do! Here! take the shirt away, Clare!—the very sight of it makes me ill! And if you take my advice

you will put the whole set upon the fire at once, and never let Colonel Iredell wear one of them again.”

Clare feels more inclined to cry than laugh; but at the idea of six flannel shirts burning on the fire at once, and the fearful manner in which they would make their holocaust apparent to the senses of the household, she cannot help laughing, and she pretends it is at Lady Brodhurst’s opinion.

“Really, mamma, I am afraid I can’t quite afford to throw away all Frank’s winter shirts, and I am surprised to hear you advising me to practise such a want of economy. Remember, I should have to sit down and make him six more myself, and mine would not be half so well embroidered as these. I am afraid I must keep them a little longer. Mrs. Seymour beats me altogether at needlework.”

“Take care she doesn’t beat you in other ways beside needlework, my dear!”

"O ! I have no doubt she does, mamma—in singing, for instance. I don't pretend to compete in Frank's eyes with half the ladies of our acquaintance—except in my great love for him," adds Clare in a lower voice.

Lady Brodhurst makes no answer ; and after a few moments of silence, her daughter turns upon her heel and carries the shirt back into her husband's room. As she folds and lays it in the drawer again she wonders she never observed the mass of embroidery upon it before. It certainly must have taken a long time to do. And the stitches are so even too ; each one seems to have been put in with such care ! Well, Frank is worth the utmost care that can be taken for him a thousand times over !

She is still kneeling by the open drawer when Iredell comes in, and asks what she is doing there. She relates partly what has occurred between her mother and herself.

Her husband's brows are knit at the narration.

“I wish to Heaven,” he says, “that you would keep my name and my friends' names out of your discussions with Lady Brodhurst, Clare! She has always showed herself impertinently curious with regard to my affairs, and I don't choose her curiosity shall be gratified. What need had you to show her the shirt at all?”

“I did it on purpose to prove that I do not share her opinion with respect to Mrs. Seymour.”

“You did it for the best, my pet, I know; but don't do it again. Let your mother think what she likes. You *know* it is not true! As for myself, I should like to have boxed Addy Seymour's ears for bearing down upon us in that unceremonious fashion last night; but Lady Brodhurst was so uncivil to her, that I was obliged to show her a little extra attention. I

cannot be dictated to in my own house, Clare!"

"Of course not, darling."

Iredell has spoken sharply, but his tempers pass as quickly as they arise, and before he encounters his mother-in-law at the breakfast-table, he is apparently himself again.

Whilst he is absent in the discharge of his military duties, Mrs. Seymour pops in as usual, and Clare is surprised, after the conversation that passed between her mother and herself that morning, to see with how much affability Lady Brodhurst receives her guest.

Though, after a while, the aim of the elder lady is apparent. She is trying to "draw" Mrs. Seymour for the sake of proving her own charge against her; and Addy, who is always but too ready to boast of her intimacy with Colonel Iredell, falls into the snare without a struggle.

"If I understand my daughter aright,

you are an old friend of her husband's," commences Lady Brodhurst, as Mrs. Seymour produces her lace work and settles herself down for an hour's busy idleness.

"O, very old! I can't tell you *how* old—I should be quite ashamed to remember. We were children together, Lady Brodhurst."

"Yes; I think you told me that before. But children's friendships are not generally very interesting."

"O! don't you think so?"—with clasped hands—"the associations are so sweet and innocent, though, of course, they cannot be compared to the friendship of older people. But Frank has never changed towards me—never!"

"It's not in his nature to change," observes Clare, warmly.

"No, dear, of course not; I know that. Still, many do. But we never have, and never will—that I firmly believe!"

And Mrs. Seymour looks melancholy and sentimental.

"You knew him perhaps in India," remarks Lady Brodhurst. She fancies Mrs. Seymour has an air about her like that of the hardened flirts with whom she has been told that Indian garrisons abound.

"No; not in India. Our meeting again after we were both grown up was most remarkable. We had lost sight of each other for years, and I had married—" here Mrs. Seymour heaves a deep sigh; "and Frank—well, I don't suppose we had forgotten each other, but still we met almost as strangers—I knew him directly. 'That is Francis Iredell!' I screamed, and as soon as we had shaken hands it seemed as if we had never parted. All the long interval appeared like a dream."

"How very romantic!" sneers Lady Brodhurst. "I suppose your husband was quite

as delighted at meeting him again as you were?"

"O! poor Henry had never seen Frank before, but they have been the best of friends since. He lived at our house before his marriage with this young lady here—morning, noon, and night, it was just the same, we never thought a meal complete without him."

"And was it on that occasion you made him those beautiful shirts, Mrs. Seymour?"

Addy Seymour glances up quickly, and colours.

"I was showing mother one of those exquisitely made shirts this morning, and she admired the workmanship as much as I do. I think they are too good to use, Mrs. Seymour."

"O! those flannel shirts! They are nothing. I made them ages and ages ago."

"You took a vast deal of trouble over them," says Lady Brodhurst.

"I think not. I am fond of my needle, and generally considered a quick worker. Now, his Indian cambric shirts *were* troublesome to make, if you like."

"I thought you didn't know him in India," interposes Clare's mother quickly.

Addy Seymour sees she has made a mistake. The truth is, the Indian part of her acquaintanceship with Iredell, which took place before her marriage with Henry Seymour, was not entirely free from scandal, and, as a rule, she ignores the fact of having been with him until she came to Woolwich. As to the infantile associations, they are a sham from beginning to end, but a sham she has kept up so long that she almost begins to believe in it herself. As she answers Lady Brodhurst's remark, Addy makes the still further mistake of hesitation.

"Well—no!—not exactly; but my husband is a Calcutta merchant, you know, and only lives in England on account of his

health, and Frank was in Calcutta part of the time we were. I heard his name mentioned—that is all."

"Did you make the cambric shirts on account of his name?" urges Lady Brodhurst.

"O, those unlucky shirts! Will you never leave me alone about them? I really shall tell you nothing more," says Mrs. Seymour, trying to laugh the matter off, but looking uneasy the while.

Clare has been watching her countenance during the preceding conversation with the utmost wonder.

"But if you knew Frank's name so well," she says in her turn, "I wonder you did not send to tell him you were in Calcutta."

"My dear Clare, Mrs. Seymour may have had her own reasons for not wishing to make herself known to Colonel Iredell," says Lady Brodhurst.

"Well, not exactly that," replies Addy;

"but I was only just married, you know, and husbands, as a rule, don't care about their wives introducing handsome young friends into the house, and so I thought it more prudent not to recognise Frank just then. Perhaps I was foolish. I was but a girl, you see, and knew no better. And Frank quite understood my motive; I made no secret of it to him."

At this juncture, Iredell having entered the open door without knocking, rattles his sword down in the hall and strides into the drawing-room. As his eyes fall on Mrs. Seymour, his brows contract. The effect of the unpleasantness of the morning has not left him yet, and her presence recalls it. His greeting to her sounds very cool after the empressement of the night before.

"Mrs. Seymour has been amusing us with a description of some of her Calcutta experiences," exclaims Lady Brodhurst, who

is more delighted than usual at her son-in-law's inopportune entrance.

"Ah! those were jolly days, weren't they? for such as cared about them," he adds, in a tone of voice that sounds as if he had not cared much about them himself. "Talk of gaiety in England! It's milk-and-water compared to the pace they go in Calcutta! I should like to have a pound for every dance we had together at those balls, Addy, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Seymour laughs nervously, and gathers up her work. She has suddenly discovered that she promised Henry she wouldn't be away more than an hour, and that she must return home at once.

No one attempts to gainsay her. Iredell sees her politely to the hall door, and then goes upstairs to change his uniform. Lady Brodhurst turns eagerly to her daughter—

"There, my dear, I hope you are satisfied; you heard it with your own ears! A tissue

of lies from beginning to end. The woman could make neither head nor tail of her own story. She has been brought up as his sister, and yet didn't dare recognise him before her husband ; she screamed, 'There's Francis Iredell ' directly she saw him in Woolwich ; although she had known him to be in Calcutta, she did not speak to him whilst there, and yet she danced with him every night ! And as for those cambric shirts ! My dear, I never heard a woman make such a fool of herself in all my life."

And Lady Brodhurst, apparently more overcome by the folly than the deceit, subsides upon the sofa and fans herself.

"It is certainly all very strange and very mysterious," replies Clare, wonderingly. "I can't think why Mrs. Seymour should make such a fuss about it, for Frank has never denied his intimacy with her."

"My dear, did he tell you about Calcutta before to-day?"

"No, mamma!"

"Or the dancing?"

"No!"

"Or the cambric shirts?"

"No!" comes again from Mrs. Iredell's lips, but each time less confidently than the last.

"Of course not! Men never *do* tell these things to their wives. But there's a great deal more in all this than meets the eye; you may rest assured of that. I could believe *anything* of that woman—*anything*."

Lady Brodhurst's assertion is so vehement, and Clare has so much faith in her opinion, that her thoughts fly back with a sudden effort to the confidence Iredell reposed in her before their marriage. He had refused at the time to give her the name of the person implicated in his error, for fear, he said, she might some day meet her or her relations. Supposing Addy Seymour should be that woman!

At the idea Clare turns sick and giddy, and puts out her hand to a chair for support. The utter improbability of it never strikes her. She only feels the pain. We may hear terrible things of those we love, and mourn over while scarcely realising them ; but it is an awful trial to a woman to be actually brought in contact with a real or imaginary rival !

“ Don’t say that, mamma ! ” gasps poor Clare.

“ I do say it, my child : I must say it ! I know you will hear nothing against Colonel Iredell ; but that woman is a serpent, and the sooner you get rid of her the better. Cambric shirts indeed ! I should like to have seen your poor papa wear shirts that had been ordered for him—let alone made for him—by any one but myself. Shirts indeed ! I call it positively indecent for a woman to make shirts for any man who is not her husband in the eyes of the law.”

"Come along, ladies ! it's luncheon time," says Iredell from the threshold. "Leave discussion, and think of cutlets."

Lady Brodhurst draws his attention to his wife.

"Come, my poor darling," she says, rising, "come and try to eat something. It will do you good."

"Why ! what's the matter with Clare?" he exclaims.

At any other moment his cordial voice and tender smile would have cured her, whatever was the matter. But just now she responds to neither. She feels cold from head to foot.

"Are you not well, pet?" he inquires, lovingly. She tries to smile and answer "Yes;" but she slips her arm through her mother's instead of his to go into the dining-room. He does not observe the action : it is too natural an one. But he regards her anxiously more than once during

the progress of the meal, and notices with concern that she does not eat. Once, as he crosses the room to pour her out a glass of wine, his hand is placed upon her shoulder, and she cannot resist the temptation to press her lips upon it.

It is a passive vow of absolute fidelity to her liege master. Whatever he has done—whatever he has been—he is hers now and for ever.

Iredell takes the little homage as his due, and kisses her on the face for answer. But the girl's heart feels very heavy—very heavy indeed.





CHAPTER II.

“DUST IN CLARE'S EYES.”

FRANKNESS may be a virtue, but it is not a virtue that brings its own reward. The hearts that cannot keep anything to themselves, that fret and burn under the burthen of a secret, and would rather be openly despised than accept a homage to which they have no right, are not the hearts to get on well in this world, where each man's endeavour is to hide as much of his true self as possible from his neighbours' eyes. This is the first time Clare has ever kept a thought of any consequence from Iredell, and she is miserable under the constraint. Since the day of their marriage he has encouraged her to

speak as openly to him as a child to its father; he has shown her how the only security for happiness in such an union as theirs is entire confidence; and he has entreated her never to be afraid to tell him anything, whatever blame may accrue to herself in the matter. And she has been used to go to him with her most girlish wants and ideas, to confide to him her silliest thoughts, and he has been most careful never to laugh at, or appear contemptuous of, the plainest proofs of her ignorance or folly. For Iredell's character is reforming itself under the influence of the pure-hearted, single-minded girl he is pledged to protect and cherish; and he is a more thoughtful, a more earnest, and a better man than he has ever been before. The past, which only pained, has begun to terrify him. He would put even the remembrance of it away from him if he could, lest the shadow of its influence should

fall upon his wife—in after years upon his children.

He has observed Clare's mood at luncheon, with a degree of insight as well as pain. He is sure that something has upset her, and he rightly attributes the “something” to Lady Brodhurst's influence. But he says nothing. He is content to let it pass, feeling certain that his “little girl,” as he fondly calls her, will come and tell him everything that is passing in her mind before long.

He is mentally inclined to bestow a few uncomplimentary epithets on Lady Brodhurst as the cause of Clare's unusual discomfiture, but he leaves the house again without any further allusion to it; only blessing himself for the knowledge that his mother-in-law's visit is not likely to be a long one.

Clare, on the contrary, still moody, still oppressed, still miserable—she cannot tell

herself honestly why—goes out for a drive into the country with mamma, who dilates largely on the iniquity of men and the deceit of women, as lively topics for a young wife's digestion.

"Has Colonel Iredell really never told you anything definite of his past life?" inquires Lady Brodhurst.

Her daughter does not reply.

"Clare! this is the second time I have put the same question to you, and you have not answered me."

"I beg your pardon, mamma!"

She has been letting her eyes roam, poor child, over the beautiful cornfields, now ripe for harvest, without seeing them, whilst her thoughts have been wandering far away into the unknown past, and her mind wondering—with a sick, unhealthy wonder—if Mrs. Seymour can really be the woman for whom Frank went out to India—who married another man—and for whose loss,

he confessed to her, he mourned at the time so bitterly.

“What did you ask me, mamma?”

“It doesn't signify, my dear! If you are so busied with your own concerns I will not trouble you to listen to me.”

The girl is too unhappy even to dispute her mother's assertion. She sighs deeply, and turns her heavy eyes upon the corn-fields again. She is like a devotee who has been taught to believe steadfastly in the existence of one God, and has had his faith suddenly shaken by the rude shock of an unanswerable argument. The belief still lives, but the impossibility of proving it unassailable is agony.

As Iredell conjectured, Clare cannot bear this unusual burthen in secret long. She is so silent during their family dinner, and Lady Brodhurst's manner is so portentously polite, that neither of them encourage him to spend the evening at home. He cannot

sulk or be distant ; it is not in his nature. He is quick, fiery, and passionate, but he only displays his temper upon great occasions. When women chase him by such moods as the present, he shows his disinclination for their company by leaving it. So when they return to the drawing-room, he says to his wife, carelessly—

“ I am going over to Pelham’s, Clare—don’t sit up for me, as I may be late ! ” And he tenders his hand to his mother-in-law for good-night.

“ Going out ! ” exclaims Lady Brodhurst, with surprise.

“ Yes ! I am going out.”

He passes up the stairs to his dressing-room. Clare cannot bear it any longer. She has not seen his sweet mirthful smile once to-day, and, regardless of her mother’s inquiries and injunctions, she flies after her husband.

Iredell knows what she has come for, but

as she enters the room he does not turn to greet her.

She steals up behind him, throws her arms about his neck, and relieves her overcharged feelings by a burst of tears. He sits down and takes her on his knee.

“What is it, my Clare? Tell your husband all about it!”

“O! Frank, is—is—Mrs. Seymour the woman you told me about?”

“What woman, my dear?”

“The one you—you ran away with—and that left you afterwards and made you so—so—miserable!”

Iredell rises and puts the girl off his knee. He is silent; but when Clare ventures to glance at him, she sees his face is dark, and his mouth firmly set. She has never seen him look so angry before. She stands apart—cold, miserable, and wishing she had bitten out her tongue before she had spoken to him as she has.

"Who has put this idea into your head?" he says at last. His voice is low, as though he could not trust himself to raise it, but it is very stern and grave.

"No one!" she falters.

"That is not the truth. Some one must have done so. You would never have thought so meanly of me of your own accord."

"But you told me of—of—*her*, before we were married."

"That is, you mean to say, I reposed a confidence in you, which proves my folly."

"O! Frank! don't say that," she interposes.

"I treated you as a man should treat the woman he intends to make his wife; I told you *all*. But I gave you credit for believing, from the mere fact of my doing so, that I was above putting upon you the insult of which you suspect me now."

The girl is silent; she does not know

what to say to him ; and after a pause he goes on—

“ When I confided to you that error of my past life, Clare, I confided to you also the sorrow and remorse I felt for the commission of it. Can you have any trust in my truth—my honour—if, after that, you can believe I would permit that person to spend days in your company—running in and out of my house as a familiar friend. My God ! how low I must have fallen in your eyes !”

“ Frank ! Frank ! for Heaven’s sake don’t say that. It was all my own folly and jealousy ; I see it now. And those *horrid* shirts !”

Iredell can hardly help laughing at the comic ending to so tragic a commencement ; although his beloved girl is weeping passionately on his breast the while.

“ Clare !” he says, seriously, “ it is not the shirts. It is your mother. She was

always trying to set you against me before our marriage, and she is carrying on the same game now."

"But Mrs. Seymour is so strange, Frank, and tells such extraordinary stories about you, and contradicts herself so constantly, that I don't wonder at her raising mamma's suspicions. She always talks as if you were in love with her, and—were you, Frank?"

"No, my darling! a thousand times *no!* Addy Seymour is a fool. I met her in Calcutta when I went out to India, and we flirted a great deal—so much so that we got talked about, and for her sake I dropped the acquaintance. When we met again in Woolwich, about two years since, the flirtation was renewed in a milder form. She talked largely of our old friendship, and made up that convenient fable of our having been brought up together to account for our intimacy. I lived a good deal at their

house, and she showed me much kindness. She has always had, I believe, a sneaking fondness for me, but I have never encouraged it in any way. I shake hands with her husband, Clare! That fact alone should have convinced you that I do not make love to his wife—I am not a blackguard, my child!"

Clare cannot answer him. She is too shocked that he should think it necessary to make such an affirmation to her—he, her hero and her demi-god! She only clings closer to him in her penitence, and stops his mouth with her kisses.

"So much do I dislike Mrs. Seymour visiting us in the unceremonious way she does, Clare, that the other day I did what is actually repugnant to my feelings, and that is to speak openly to a woman on the subject of herself. It makes a man feel such a coxcomb. But I did it for your sake and my own comfort. She appears to have pro-

fited so little by the hint, that I had determined this morning to give her another and a plainer one; but now I shall let the matter rest, at all events until Lady Brodhurst leaves us. I cannot allow even your mother to asperse the guests she may meet in our house, or to be planting suspicions in your breast concerning them. I shall not endeavour to clear my conduct in her eyes, nor do I wish you to do so. She may think what she pleases. But if she tries to put any more nonsense into your head about Mrs. Seymour, or Mrs. Anybody else, why, the shorter she makes her visit here the better ; and so you may tell her."

" Frank ! she never shall—no one ever shall!"

" So you always say, Clare, *when you are with me* ; but my influence over you is not so strong in my absence as I should like to see it. I cannot blame you for attaching importance to your mother's opinions. You

were brought up with her, and naturally your affection and esteem for her are great. All I ask is that you will never keep her opinions to yourself, and brood over them. Come and tell me everything, and I will soon set the wrong to rights.”

“My darling, my darling!” she murmurs, “you are so much too good to me.”

“No, Clare! I wont have you say that. Every day I feel myself more unworthy of the trust I have had confided to me in you. But don't let any one come between us! Remember what you said yourself last night —we are one, and we must not be divided.”

He kisses her fondly, and there is no cloud between them as they leave the dressing-room together.

Clare tries to persuade her husband to give up going to Captain Pelham's, and spend the evening at home, but she is unsuccessful. He has said he will go, and he keeps his word. No one can make him

alter a resolution once taken. That is Iredell's disposition. Besides, he wishes to show Lady Brodhurst that he is not to be browbeaten in his own house. So he passes through the hall into the open air, and Clare returns to the drawing-room, but with so radiant a face that her mother guesses at once what has taken place upstairs.

"Colonel Iredell has been throwing a little dust in your eyes, my dear, I see," she says, as her daughter enters.

"O! mamma dear! it is all such utter rubbish about Mrs. Seymour. Such a complete mistake! I told dear Frank I didn't like her talking about him in the way she does, and telling such stories about Calcutta and the other places; and he has told me exactly all about it. I really think she must be a little mad."

"Yes?" says Lady Brodhurst, incredulously.

“They never knew each other as children,” continues Clare; “that is quite a fabrication of Addy’s; and though Frank used to flirt with her years and years ago, as of course he did with lots of other women—all men do the same——”

“No, Clare; please to stop there! You must allow me to contradict *that* assertion. I am willing to make every allowance for Colonel Iredell’s past follies, but I cannot admit that all men are the same. Gentlemen are *not* all alike in this particular, I am happy to say; indeed, I should hope that few are. I am sure poor Sir Walter would have been quite shocked at the mere idea; but that has nothing, of course, to do with the present discussion.”

“Very well, mamma dear! let it pass. We will suppose my Frank to be the very worst of his sex that ever saw the light—still, as far as Mrs. Seymour is concerned, he has done no harm.”

"And you call flirting with a married woman no harm?—and he a married man, too."

"They don't flirt now. That was all over years ago. He has never flirted with her since she was married."

"O!" remarks Lady Brodhurst, with a whole alphabet of meaning in the single letter.

"You might have guessed that from the fact that Frank is a friend of her husband," says Clare, adopting, like many before her, another person's sentiment and passing it off as her own.

"*That* would be no obstacle with *some* people," replies her mother.

"But it would with Frank. You don't know him."

"My dear! if you are satisfied, no one has a right to complain. But I hope we shall not see much more of Mrs. Seymour during my stay in Woolwich: for whatever

she may be, she is not a lady to my taste.”

“ I hope not, either ; but if she comes we must be polite to her. Frank will never allow a slight to be offered to any guest in his house.”

Lady Brodhurst tosses her head and says nothing. She does not like to hear that pronoun “ we ” coupled with any injunction of Colonel Iredell’s. She guesses that Clare is only repeating what her husband has told her ; and the mother feels she owes him a twofold grudge—one, for asserting his independence, the other for exerting more influence over her daughter than she has the power to do herself. She perceives, with a fierce pang of jealousy, that if Clare’s affection for her is not lessened, it dwindles by comparison with the love she bears Iredell, and that the maternal authority is losing weight in proportion with the strong chains that married life has cast about her.

If the question were seriously put to Lady Brodhurst, she could scarcely wish her child less happy than she is ; but she feels the change bitterly, as mothers will. Added to this, she is not a woman to sympathise with the idolatrous love that Clare cherishes for Iredell. What she told her daughter about her own marriage was perfectly correct. She made Sir Walter an excellent wife. She took the keenest interest in his household and expenditure ; she was faithful to him in thought, word, and deed, as he was to her ; and she mourned his loss for the stereotyped time, and has never thought of replacing him. And added to all this, she was perfectly contented with her lot, and never wished it altered.

What woman, as she is fond of repeating, could desire more ? And there are hundreds and thousands of women who would have taken her place as Sir Walter's wife and

fulfilled the duties as well, and been quite as contented as she was. These are the good women of this world, who pass through it without a single temptation to be otherwise than good; who have no strong cravings after an ideal love, after a passion for which they would think the world well lost; who consider such terms as “union of souls,” or “marriage of intellect and sympathy,” as sentences only fit to be put in a novel, and which have nothing whatever to do with the intellects and souls of this work-a-day existence.

But Lady Brodhurst's daughter is not one of these. Where Clare got her great big soul from—the innocent yet eager soul that looked out at Iredell from the depths of her violet eyes and took his heart by storm—is a mystery: certainly not from her mother. Perhaps her dead father possessed it and hid it from the gaze of men; or some great-grandfather or mother, with

the same liquid eyes, loved as Clare loves, and felt that the love must be returned or die.

Anyway, she has inherited the dangerous gift, and Lady Brodhurst is unable to understand the possession of it. She sees in Iredell simply a man who allows himself great license and does not pay sufficient deference to the opinions of his mother-in-law.

Clare would no more dream of telling Lady Brodhurst anything about those sweet love passages that take place between her husband and herself in private, and that make more than amends for any folly of his past or present life, than she would dream of trying to fly over the roof of the house; and Lady Brodhurst would understand and sympathise with the one attempt quite as much as with the other.

She has not been a favourite with the other sex herself. They have admired and

liked, and spoken well of her, perhaps ; but, with the exception of her husband, no man has made, or wished to make, a friend of her. So that as she has no sympathy with, so has she little understanding of, their ways and manners ; and her ignorance leads her to exaggerate any fault that may come to the surface.

The women that know least of men judge them harshest. Their private lives, being a dark mystery to them, are magnified by their fertile imaginations to something much worse than they really are. If their outward conduct is decent and respectable, they are hypocrites ; if it be somewhat lax, they are libertines. So they catch it either way ; and Lady Brodhurst is determined not to let her son-in-law escape.

Clare's bashful adoration for him recalls no sweet remembrance of her own wooing days to bring a tear or smile into her eye. She only thinks with a maternal shiver

that her poor child is being duped and her dignity outraged. She has not yet quite arrived at the point of making her sentiments known to Iredell himself; but she feels that it must come to that, if things go on as they have begun.

The fact is, Lady Brodhurst has come down to Woolwich, expecting the whole garrison to be turned upside down for her arrival; and finding that, however much attention may be paid her, she is after all but a secondary personage in the little household, and that Iredell presumes still to amuse himself with his other guests, and to make his wife his first thought, she takes umbrage at the supposed neglect, and, not daring to vent her annoyance on him, displays it secondhand to poor Clare.

Iredell tries hard to make up, not to his mother-in-law, but to his wife, for the unpleasantness about the shirts. He endures the infliction of Addy's next visit with equa-

nimity, but behaves to her with studied politeness throughout it; and finding that she has determined to spend another evening with them, suddenly walks off to her house and brings Mr. Seymour back with him, greatly to Mrs. Seymour's discomfiture and the benefit of Lady Brodhurst, who finds him a most agreeable and well-informed companion.

Addy takes the first opportunity to murmur, "Cruel!" under her breath to Iredell; but he answers her with such an emphatic "Nonsense!" that she is unable to say more, and tries to punish him by an affected anger of which he takes no notice.

Still Lady Brodhurst cannot make friends with her son-in-law. Still she is sure there is something hidden beneath this sudden armistice which it is intended to gloss over or conceal. Those embroidered shirts rankle in her mind; and Iredell can scarcely take a handkerchief from his pocket, but her eyes

are roving over it, to try and discover if his crest is worked in the corner, or his initials marked in hair.

One day Clare finds her in the drawing-room poring through her gold eye-glasses at a faint, half-erased inscription in a richly-bound edition of Byron's works.

"What have you there, mamma?"

"I am trying to make out this writing, my dear. It looks rather suspicious to me. As far as I can decipher, it is—'*To my own darling Francis, from his most loving Martha.*' I call that rather a warm inscription to put into a book—don't you?"

"I never noticed it. Let me see, mamma. O! what pale, faded-looking ink!"

"*Martha!* Now I should very much like to know who *Martha* is!" soliloquises Lady Brodhurst in a tone of the utmost satisfaction at having caught Iredell tripping again.

Clare regards the writing for a few minutes

in silence, and then bursts into a merry laugh.

“O, mamma! you thought you had caught my boy again, did you? Why, that is meant for ‘*his most loving Mother*.’”

“I don’t believe it, Clare!”

“I *know* it is. She gave him almost all his books, and she used to write in a very scrawly way. And you were sure it must be a woman’s name! My poor Frank! You’ll never believe any good of him if he lives to a hundred and ten.”

“Really, Clare! I see nothing to laugh at in this absurd manner, even if I have made a mistake. Your behaviour is childish.”

“I can’t help laughing; it’s so ludicrous! How Frank will roar when I tell him!”

“I beg you will not mention the occurrence to Colonel Iredell. There is nothing strange in my having mistaken the word. The strange part to me is, that he should

have cared to preserve anything his poor mother gave him——”

“ Frank loved his mother dearly,” says Clare, quickly.

“ So others have said, before and after him,” remarks Lady Brodhurst, with a significance which is rather hard upon the daughter, who has never wantonly neglected a duty towards her.

Notwithstanding her mother’s caution, however, the story of “ Martha” does reach Iredell’s ears; and though he laughs as heartily over it as Clare anticipated, he notes it down as another instance of Lady Brodhurst’s desire to make mischief between his wife and himself.





CHAPTER III.

“VENUS VICTRIX.”

AFEW mornings after the last incident, Lady Brodhurst comes down to the breakfast-table enveloped by a halo of important mystery. She receives Iredell's salutation with chilling gravity; she embraces Clare with compassionate fervour; she takes her seat in silence, and declines either to eat or drink. Her son-in-law, who suspects some fresh plot is brewing against his peace of mind, refuses to take any notice of her behaviour; but Clare is most anxious to ascertain the reason, and plies her mother with inquiries as to whether she is ill, or has heard any bad news, or been upset in any other way. For some time Lady

Brodhurst parries the assaults by silence, or a simple negative, until Iredell, irritated by her manner, tells his wife rather sharply to leave off worrying her mother and go on with her own meal.

“Yes, love!” says Lady Brodhurst, taking up his cue with the air of a martyr, “go on with your breakfast and never mind me. You only put Colonel Iredell out of temper, and you can do no good.”

“I’m not out of temper,” says Iredell; “but it would certainly look more sociable if you would eat or drink something. You have not even had a cup of tea.”

“Thank you,” with a deep sigh; “but I wish for no tea. I have seen *that* this morning which makes me feel as though I should never drink tea again.”

“O, mamma! what do you mean?” cries Clare, in fresh alarm and curiosity. Her husband touches her under the table with his foot.

“Your mother has already declined to solve the mystery for us, Clare. It is not polite to urge her any further.”

“It is no mystery,” replies Lady Brodhurst, who is burning to disclose her secret; “but it is a terrible misfortune—in *my* eyes, that is to say.”

“Whatever it may be, rest assured that neither Clare nor I would wish to force your confidence. I have no doubt that upon second thoughts your misfortune will not appear so formidable as at present—perhaps may melt away altogether.”

“There is no chance of that, Colonel Iredell.”

“Then the next best thing is to try and forget it. What can’t be cured must be endured—eh! Lady Brodhurst?”

“I wouldn’t endure it for a single day or hour, if I were the victim,” says his mother-in-law, now trembling with rage.

“Would you not? But whilst you talk

in such riddles, you cannot expect one to answer you intelligently."

"Perhaps *that* is a riddle," exclaims her ladyship, unable to preserve silence a moment longer, as she draws a photographed carte de visite from her pocket and casts it across the table. "Perhaps it is a riddle you are unable to read, Colonel Iredell, or that you will refuse to read in the presence of your wife and your mother-in-law."

As she consummates the action she looks half frightened, and would have seized the photograph in her hands again, but that Iredell's have already closed upon it.

As he gazes at the face it represents, Clare's eyes are fixed anxiously upon his. She sees the blood forsake his cheeks—hears the hard laboured breathing which assails him—watches the trembling of the strong hand that holds the portrait—and feels intuitively that some misfortune is at hand.

"Where did you find this?" he demands

presently, in a dreamy voice, of Lady Brodhurst.

"I don't know what right you have to put the question, but I am willing to answer it. I found that portrait, Colonel Iredell, in the chest of drawers in my bedroom. It had fallen between the back of the drawer and the chest itself. I perceive it is no stranger to you."

"I lost it years ago," he murmurs in the same measured tones he used before.

It is a beautiful face he is gazing on, beautiful even when seen through the medium of a photograph. It represents a woman with a small, exquisitely-moulded figure, leaning over the back of a chair and smiling, full-face, at the spectator. Her large dark eyes are replete with tenderness, yet her mouth is curved with merriment. The unbound hair that flows over her white dress reaches rippling below her waist, and

her small hands, laden with rings, are clasped before her.

Under the portrait is written in Iredell's own hand, "VENUS VICTRIX, June, 1860."

He gazes at it almost in a dream. As he sees the pictured loveliness that has been lost to his sight for so many years, and recalls the time when it was immortalised, and the feelings he experienced for it then, all the Present seems to evaporate, and he stands alone with his dead Past. His wife—his mother-in-law—the breakfast-room at Woolwich—fade in air, and he is roaming again beneath the blue skies of Italy, with those tiny hands clasped in his own. He scents the violets of Parma, the roses and orange-blossoms of Naples; he sees the silver Arno winding through Florence, and hears theplash of the gondolas of Venice. The woman whose face he looks upon is dead to him—more surely dead than she could ever have been with a shroud wrapped

about her marble limbs, and the worms disfiguring her flower-like face. He despises, he loathes her! He would not take the tiny hands upon which he has pressed so many loving kisses in his own now, were they stretched out to him for pity! So he believes and feels. Yet as he gazes on the senseless piece of cardboard, so suddenly thrust before him, he remembers nothing but the love he bore her; and two burning tears, despite of himself, rise slowly to his eyes, and remain there.

“Frank darling! may I not see?” asks the loving voice of Clare from behind him.

It recalls him to himself. It makes the sunny Past, in which he once believed, roll away like a shadow, and the hideous treachery by which it was succeeded take its place. It transforms the smiling mouth before him into a mockery, the tender eyes into labyrinths of deceit; the little graceful hands into weapons that struck him the

worst blow he ever received in his life. It makes him remember *whose* beauty first dawned to comfort him for all that he had lost—*whose* purity restored his faith in womankind—*whose* love has followed him to his home, to be its sunshine and its blessing for evermore !

And with this recollection comes another—that of the mother, whose first aim should have been to secure the happiness of so good and true a daughter, but who has coldly calculated upon this means for upsetting it—who has in fact made him betray himself.

Iredell starts from his dream with an oath, and his wrath is terrible in its extremity. All the softness with which he looked upon the photograph dies out of his face. He frowns darkly ; his mouth, with its iron jaw, becomes hard set ; each muscle in his face and figure is knit with rage.

He loses all idea of further concealment ; he knows he has nothing to tell about this

portrait but what his wife has already heard, and he does not care whether his mother-in-law will like his confession or not.

"Clare!" he says, as he places the carte de visite in her hands, "you know who this is!—you have already heard her history and mine. You can tell Lady Brodhurst, since she is so curious about my private affairs, that it is the portrait of the lady with whom I eloped from her husband."

He makes the speech out of sheer bravado, from a desire to convince his mother-in-law that it is nothing to him if she knows of his shortcomings or not—but he is little prepared for the result of his boldness. Clare takes the intelligence quietly enough. She has already guessed that the picture is of one of his old loves, and it little signifies to her which.

But with Lady Brodhurst it is very different. For a moment she seems perfectly

paralysed by Iredell's assertion ; then starts from her seat with a loud scream.

"Mamma ! mamma ! pray be composed ; pray be quiet ! it is nothing to make a fuss about. I heard the whole story before I was married, and it really concerns no one but myself."

"What story ? which story ?"

"The story of this lady, with whom Frank—Frank——"

Clare finds it harder to announce the truth than she thought it would be. Does a woman ever arrive at the pitch of hearing or speaking of the objects of her lover's former passions with complacency until she has ceased to care for him ? As she stammers over her husband's name she looks to him for help.

"Go on, my darling," he says ; "finish the sentence. Don't keep Lady Brodhurst on the tenter-hooks of curiosity."

The tender address revives her courage.

“It was years and years ago,” she recommences, “that this lady left her husband for Frank.”

“I used all my persuasions to make her come with me, my dear. Give the devil his due,” interposes Iredell, sarcastically.

“You eloped with a married woman!” pants Lady Brodhurst.

“I eloped with a married woman,” he repeats, doggedly.

“But it was years and years ago,” again pleads Clare, as though the distance of time extenuated the fact.

“And pray, why was I never informed of such a disgraceful circumstance in your life?” says Lady Brodhurst, as she rises from her chair and steadies her trembling frame by placing one hand upon the table.

“Because your daughter’s guardians did not consider it necessary that you should be so informed, madam. When I proposed for Clare I told them everything, with full

option to communicate the intelligence to you. They concluded not to do so. Nevertheless, when I found that you were doing all in your power to paint my character in its worst colours to my future wife, I confessed the truth to her in order that you might not be able to say afterwards that I had married her under false pretences. I was never more glad than I am at this moment that I was led to act as I did. Your conduct in this matter, which I consider unjustifiably cruel, might have made a most serious rupture between us otherwise."

"*Unjustifiably cruel!*" screams Lady Brodurst, who is losing all control over herself; "and pray, what do you call yours, sir? To come with your blackened character, your vicious life, your past career—one of disgrace and dishonour—and sue for the hand of my poor innocent child, my betrayed and injured daughter."

“Lady Brodhurst, if you were a man you should know what it is to use such words to me. Since you are a woman, and my wife’s mother, I can only refuse to listen to them by leaving your presence.”

“O, my poor Clare! my poor, poor child! Come to your mother, who has never deceived nor injured you!” cries Lady Brodhurst, with open arms.

Clare glances at Iredell.

“Go to your mother,” he says, determinately, “if you believe the insinuation she makes against me.”

But the girl moves towards his side instead.

“You have *never*, deceived nor injured me, Frank,” she says, though the tears are standing in her eyes at the quarrel that is taking place.

Lady Brodhurst’s anger completely masters her prudence.

“O, very well!” she exclaims, loudly,

"go to his arms, of course, in preference to mine, but never come back to me again!"

"Mother! mother! you don't mean that!" cries Clare.

"I *do* mean it, Clare. I told you what that man was from the beginning, but you would never listen to me. You chose to believe him instead. Now you see what your obstinacy has brought you to!—the wife of a libertine, a roué, an——"

"Madam! you shall not sully the ears of my wife in my presence by your coarse abuse of myself. Since you so far forget the position you hold in this house as to insult the master of it, I shall at least exert my authority by sending Clare out of hearing of your invectives. Clare, go to your own room, and don't return until I tell you."

"Stay where you are, Clare!" shrieks Lady Brodhurst, crimson with rage; "your mother commands you to remain."

“O, darling ! what am I to *do*?” demands the girl, appealing to her husband.

“ You will obey *me* whilst you remain under my roof,” thunders Iredell, in reply.

She passes, quietly weeping, out of their presence and creeps upstairs to her own room, as he commands her ; and sits down there miserably anxious and dispirited, but without one rebellious thought against her husband’s authority.

“ Now, madam, you can give your tongue the rein, and abuse me as much as ever you like,” exclaims Iredell as Clare leaves him alone with his mother-in-law ; “ but if you don’t wish this day to witness a separation between your daughter and yourself you must be careful to stick to the truth.”

“ I decline to speak again,” says Lady Brodhurst, whose crimson complexion has suddenly changed to an ashy grey, and who appears scarcely able to retain her feet, even with the assistance of the table.

"Because you have nothing else to say," replies her son-in-law; "because you know that my worst fault in your eyes has been winning the love of your daughter from yourself; because you are too selfish to be able to rejoice in her happiness at the expense of your own, and would rather undermine it by unjust insinuations against her husband's fidelity to her than feel it existed without help from you. You have been basely cruel, madam; basely and wickedly cruel, in attempting to destroy Clare's trust in me, and I can never look upon you as a friend again—never!"

"And I am to be parted from my child, I suppose; parted from my only child, whom I have loved better than my life, whom I have toiled and laboured and thought for for eighteen years. And this is to be my reward for giving her to you!"

Iredell is commencing some reply to the effect that Lady Brodhurst will have no one

but herself to thank in the event of such an issue as she appears to contemplate, when he is startled by seeing her relax her hold upon the table and sink slowly to the floor. He rushes to her assistance and places her in her chair, and the next moment a loud call for Collins is resounding through the house.

Clare hears the summons from her bedroom, and, considering it an order for release, is on the spot almost as soon as the lady's-maid, whom she finds in a profound flutter, loosening her mother's clothes, cutting her laces, and issuing orders, the meaning of which is unintelligible to her hearers.

"O, lor! here's her ladyship off in one of her attacks again. Please to lower her head, Colonel, till it rests on the floor. Thank you. Yes, that's right; we must lay her as flat as possible. The brandy, Miss Clare, as quick as you can, and try to

get a spoonful down her ladyship's throat. O dear! I never saw her look so bad as this before. Do you think there's any mustard in the house? I think we ought to put plasters to her feet. And, Colonel, will you send for the doctor at once, please?"

"O, what is it? what is it?" cries Clare, in the utmost alarm.

"Now, don't take on like that, Miss! It's only her ladyship's heart. She'll be round again presently. But I wish we could get her up to her bed and undress her properly. And the doctor—he doesn't live far off, I daresay."

"O no! close by. Frank darling, do send for Dr. Mackenzie. I'm so awfully frightened. You don't think it's serious, do you?"

"I've sent for Mackenzie, my own; he will be here in a minute. You say Lady Brodhurst is subject to these attacks, don't you, Collins?"

“O yes, sir, very frequent; sometimes once a week and more. But she’s a long time coming to to-day. This hot weather has been trying her ladyship terribly for a month past, that I know. But I should dearly like to get her upstairs before the doctor comes.”

Whereupon Lady Brodhurst, still unconscious, is carried up to her bedroom by her son-in-law and the man-servant, when Clare despairingly follows her and keeps watch with Collins until the arrival of Dr. Mackenzie. The little man regards the patient curiously; examines her eyeballs; listens, or professes to listen, to the pulsation of her heart; inquires what remedies have been employed; expresses his satisfaction at what has been done, and prepares to quit the room.

“Will mamma soon come to herself?” asks Clare, anxiously.

Dr. Mackenzie glances at her and nods his head.

"It will be all right soon, Mrs. Iredell. If you will be so good as to remain by Lady Brodhurst's side, I will give a few directions to the maid. This way, please," he adds to Collins, beckoning her from the room.

Collins follows him to the ground-floor. Iredell comes forward to meet them.

"How is Lady Brodhurst?" he inquires. Dr. Mackenzie closes the door and prepares to answer him.

"Dead!" he says, briefly.

"*Dead!*"

Iredell starts backward as though he had been shot, and his colour comes and goes rapidly. It is a terrible shock to him.

Dead! Can she really be dead, and his last words with her, words of anger.

"My lady *dead!*!" shrieks Collins, preparing for a fit of hysterics.

Dr. Mackenzie claps his hand upon her mouth.

"Be silent, woman, for Heaven's sake," he exclaims sharply, "and listen to what I have to say. I cannot have Mrs. Iredell alarmed. I will not have a word nor a hint breathed to her upon the subject until she is better prepared to hear it. It is perfectly true that your mistress is gone; she must have died half an hour ago. Has she been subject to these attacks?"

"O, lor! yes, sir, frequent," replies Collins, trembling with fright. "Dr. Bland in London attended her for them, and told me scores of times that her ladyship might go off any moment with them."

"Just so. You should have been careful to keep her very quiet. Any bad news or sudden emotion to lead to this attack?" continues the doctor interrogatively to Iredell.

The man does not know how to answer. He has turned away to the window, and is trying, by an effort of will, to master the

feelings that are overpowering him. Has the sinful folly of his youth not borne bitter fruit enough already that it should result in this? He was innocent of the immediate cause, and ignorant of the effect; yet he feels like a murderer.

“Had Lady Brodhurst been agitating herself this morning?” repeats Dr. MacKenzie.

“She had, I regret to say. A discussion of an unpleasant nature cropped up at the breakfast-table, and my mother-in-law grew very warm over it. But we never supposed —my wife and I had never the least idea—that there could be any danger in such a scene for her. Her present illness is the first that I have ever heard of it.”

“Angina pectoris,” says the doctor, “and probably of long standing. *You* are to blame,” he continues, turning to Collins, “since you knew of your mistress’s danger, and never warned others against it.”

“O! pray, sir, don’t say that,” cries the servant weeping, “for Dr. Bland especially cautioned me not to tell Mrs. Iredell a word on the subject, though I have given her a hint or two that her mamma was ill, thinking it my duty. But I never could have guessed her ladyship would have been took off so soon as this—never. And so sudden too; it’s like a judgment.”

“Come,” says the doctor, “you had better go back to the bedroom and remain with Mrs. Iredell. But mind, not a word that her ladyship is gone. I will join you in a few minutes. Now, dry your eyes and be discreet.”

Collins creeps upstairs again, and the men are left alone.

“My poor wife!” sighs Iredell.

“You must break it to her very gently. A shock in her condition might be attended with very serious consequences.”

“But how *can* I break it? She almost

worshipped her mother. I shall never forgive myself for what has happened."

"It is a great misfortune, Colonel, but no one is to blame in the matter. If it had not occurred to-day, it would to-morrow. The principal thing now is to soften the blow as much as possible to Mrs. Iredell. The maid says she is aware that her mother was subject to these attacks, but probably she has never seen her in one."

"Never!"

"Then it will not be difficult to persuade her to leave Lady Brodhurst to my care, and to take rest in her own room."

"We can but try," replies Iredell, and they ascend the stairs together. As they enter the bedroom, his eyes instinctively turn from the couch where the body of his mother-in-law lies, still dressed in the clothes in which she died. Clare is sitting by the open window, looking pale and infinitely

anxious, but evidently without a notion of the melancholy truth.

"Dr. Mackenzie wishes to be left alone with your mother, darling," says Iredell to his wife. "Wont you come with me and lie down and rest a little?"

"O, no! I couldn't rest, Frank, not till she is better and has spoken again. She will recover her consciousness soon, wont she?" continues Clare, appealing to the doctor.

"Yes—yes! but we must have a little patience. These attacks of the heart are sometimes of long duration. I think it would be advisable for you to do as Colonel Iredell wishes, and leave the maid and myself to attend to her ladyship."

"Cannot I be of any use? Mayn't I stay only just till she has opened her eyes again. Look, doctor! She moved then, I am sure."

"It was only the wind, Miss Clare, flut-

tering her ribbons," says Collins; "but I wish you would do as the gentlemen ask you, ma'am. I can't undress your poor mamma, nor make her comfortable, nor nothing, whilst you and the Colonel are in the room."

"Come then, Frank," says Clare, with passive mournfulness, as she puts her hand into her husband's. As she gains her own apartment she throws herself upon the sofa, and bursts into a flood of tears.

"How I wish you had not had that quarrel with her!"—she exclaims. "If poor mamma suffers from this illness I shall never forgive myself."

"My dear! how was it your fault?" asks Iredell. "*Or mine?*" he might add, but does not.

"I ought not to have told her whose portrait that was. All the misery came from that!"

Iredell groans in his inmost soul, and turns away.

"*All the misery came from that!*" And who is to calculate all the misery that may still accrue from the commission of that fatal error?

The photograph, which is in his waist-coat pocket, seems to burn into his heart as he asks himself the question. He looks at the couch on which his young wife has cast herself in a very abandonment of despair—remembers her precarious position—of the news that has to be broken to her—and thinks he has never felt so miserable in his life as he does to-day.

Presently he is recalled to the present by the sound of Clare's low sobbing.

"Dearest, don't give way! You will only make yourself ill. Hope for the best."

"How can I hope for anything whilst mamma is lying on that bed, without sense or feeling?"

"Well, then, try and sleep. I will promise to bring you the first news of her recovery."

"*Sleep!* when she is so ill. What do you think I am made of? I cannot sleep whilst I am miserable."

"Let me comfort you, darling," says Iredell, winding his arms about her; but she puts them quietly away.

"Please leave me to myself, Frank. I would rather be alone."

It is the first time in their married life that Clare has ever repulsed her husband by so much as a look or a word, and he feels it bitterly. He turns on his heel and quits the apartment, but it is with more humiliation than annoyance that he does so. The first ears of the fatal crop that he has sown are lying in his hand—only a few scattered ears, but promise of the bitter harvest to follow. Intuitively he recognises without acknowledging it, but the doubt leaves a depressing sadness on his soul.



The hours go on, and no news of any definite character reaches Clare's bedchamber. Twice or three times has she crept to the door of that other room, and with trembling lips and wobegone eyes pleaded earnestly for admittance, but in vain.

Dr. Mackenzie has seen her more than once, and put off her searching inquiries with some plausible excuse. He has given her a soothing draught also, which has only had the effect of rendering her still more restless and excited. At last he considers it best to tell her the truth.

“Is she no better?” asks Clare, with despairing perseverance, as the day begins to merge into the afternoon.

“I regret to say she is not. There have been no signs of consciousness since the first attack.”

“Have you tried the galvanic battery that Dr. Bland recommended?”

"We have tried every remedy, Mrs. Iredell, in our power."

"Why doesn't Frank telegraph for Dr. Bland? He understands mamma's constitution, perhaps, better than you do."

"Two of the principal professional men in Woolwich have seen her beside myself. I am afraid that Dr. Bland could not do anything more for her than we have."

"But do you mean to say then——" commences Clare, with starting eyes.

"That she is very dangerously ill. It is best you should know it, Mrs. Iredell. I fear she is——"

"Will she recover?" cries the girl, vehemently. "Will she recover?"

The doctor is silent.

"Dr. Mackenzie!" plucking him violently by the sleeve; "do you hear me? Do you hear what I say? Is my mother *dying*?"

The word comes out with a desperate

effort, as if it were something too horrible to mention—as if it were *impossible* it could be true.

“ My dear young lady, try and compose yourself. Think of your own health. This is a great trouble for you to bear; but you have a husband living, remember—a child to look forward to !”

Clare stares at him for a few moments in silent terror. His meaning is working its way into her brain, although it seems to freeze her blood and paralyse all her energies in its passage there. She has a husband *living*—a child to look forward to ! Then, where—*where* is her *mother* ? With a shriek that reverberates through the whole house, she gasps out the question—

“ *Is she dead?* ”

The silence that meets it is her answer.

She gives a low groan, like the last effort of a dying animal, and Dr. Mackenzie has only just time to catch her in his arms and

convey her to the sofa from which she has risen, before she is, to all appearance, as unconscious as the lifeless figure in the next room.





CHAPTER IV.

"THE FIRST EARS OF THE HARVEST."

COURSE all the assistance in the house is summoned to her aid, but as soon as Clare has recovered her senses she waves everybody away from her but Collins. She will not look at Dr. Mackenzie; the sight of Iredell seems to give her pain; the officious kindness of her own servants oppresses her. All she desires is to be left alone with her mother's maid, by whom she permits herself to be undressed and put to bed, where she lies in a kind of half-stupor, with closed eyes and lips, and the only sign of consciousness about her an occasional low moan.

Iredell, in his love and solicitude, is natu-

rally most anxious to gain admittance to his wife, that he may nurse and comfort her himself; but after a few hours of silent misery Clare's suffering takes the form of illness, and Dr. Mackenzie is re-summoned and remains the night through by her bedside, whilst the conscience-stricken author of all this confusion paces the room below and curses the means by which it has been effected. With the morning's light, however, the doctor brings him better news.

"Mrs. Iredell is quite out of danger, Colonel, and much quieter. I must caution you, however, against any excitement or emotion. You had better not go near her to-day; leave her to her attendants. And now, what can I do in the way of helping you respecting the arrangements for the inquest and the funeral?"

Iredell does not feel the doctor's prohibition so keenly on the first day. He would like to run upstairs and take his darling

in his arms, and whisper how deeply he sympathises with her grief; but his mind is so greatly relieved at the news of her safety that the minor consideration is not allowed to worry him. There is so much to be thought of also, and so much to be done. A sudden death is always attended by a certain amount of publicity and trouble. There is an inquest to be held on the body of Lady Brodhurst—as privately as possible, it is true, but still unavoidable, on account of her death having taken place away from home and her usual medical attendant. There are the relations and the trustees for the property to be written to and invited to the funeral, which is to take place from the family seat in Brambleshire. There are the arrangements to be made for the removal of the coffin by train, and the accommodation of the funeral party at Brodhurst Hall; the mourning to be ordered; the grave prepared; and the vicar

of the parish, Emmy Stewart's father, to be informed that his services will be required on the occasion.

Iredell finds his hands full of work for the next few days, and it is not lightened by Clare's behaviour to him. The first moment he is allowed to enter her room he hastens there. She is lying on her bed, motionless and silent, in the same position in which he last saw her. He could almost believe she had not moved since. Her eyes are closed, and she does not open them at his approach.

"Clare," he says, tenderly, "I am so glad you are better."

He embraces her as he speaks. And she—who has never been separated from him for a few hours but what she has flown into his arms at their reunion—she does not turn away from his kisses, but they do not encounter their usual warm response.

"I am quite well again," she replies,

languidly and indifferently; "I should get up directly if Dr. Mackenzie would only give me leave."

"But you will take every care of yourself, darling, for my sake. Remember how precious you are to me—more precious now than you have ever been before," he whispers.

"Yes, Frank, I know it, and I will be careful. Is Collins there?"

"She has left the room. Do you want anything? Can't I get it for you?"

He is thirsting to wait upon her, to take some trouble for her sake; to be her slave, her servant—this great, powerful, bronzed man, who has passed through so much toil and danger and glory—he is only anxious to bring himself down to the level of a sick nurse to become of use to the slight, fragile-looking creature before him.

Never in the days of her fresh, blushing maidenhood has Clare appealed so power-

fully to his feelings as she does now, lying on her bed, weak, pale, and miserable, like a snowdrop beaten down by the storms of spring.

Yet though his wife can surely read the deep love glowing in his eyes—those eyes which she has so often maintained no woman could resist—and hear it in the tremor of his voice, she only sighs as she answers his question in the negative.

“O, my Clare! it makes me so unhappy to see you like this.”

“I shall be all right again soon, Frank. When—when—” with a quivering lip, “is the funeral to be?”

“Don’t talk of that, darling.”

“But I wish to know.”

“On Saturday, then; from Brodhurst Hall.”

“I am glad of that. I was afraid you might have made arrangements to bury her at Woolwich, and I know she would wish

to be laid near poor papa. You must lay me there too, Frank, when the time comes."

"Clare, don't talk like that, or you'll break my heart."

"I wont, then; but it must come some day, you know. I wonder if it will be soon? And I wonder if dear mamma misses me now, as she did when I married you? I am afraid I made her very unhappy. And she was such a good, kind mother to me. She loved me so much. Dear, dear mamma! She knows I am sorry for it now."

All this disjointed kind of talk makes Iredell feel frightfully depressed. He cannot exactly say where to find fault with it. Clare's utterances are sweetly resigned and simple, and just what one would expect to hear from the lips of a daughter who has lost her only parent. She is neither violent nor vehement. There are no loud reproaches nor passionate tears mixed with her quiet mourning; yet had there been,

Iredell thinks he could have stood it better. Had Clare only cast her arms about his neck in the old impetuous fashion, and sobbed out her feelings on his breast whilst she clung to him as her chief hope and stay, he would not have had that leaden weight at his heart as he leaves her presence again. She has not rebuked him nor repulsed him; she has only been exceedingly quiet and subdued, yet she has made him feel horribly guilty of something or other.

And the next few days do not bring any change in this respect. Dr. Mackenzie says Mrs. Iredell is much better, but he will not allow her to leave her room; and Clare will scarcely allow Collins to leave her side, so that between the two her husband has not many opportunities of seeing her alone. He is thankful when Saturday arrives, and the sad details of the funeral ceremony are being carried out, that Clare is confined to

her own apartment, and has no chance of witnessing them. He is obliged to leave her for the purpose of paying the last respect of which he will ever be capable to her dead mother, and to hear the will read, by which Clare becomes the possessor, in her own right, of all Lady Brodhurst's property, personal and otherwise, which includes Brodhurst Hall, the house in town, and an income of from ten to twelve thousand a year.

To Iredell this will is no real surprise, for he was informed upon marrying Clare that she was sole heiress to whatever her mother might leave behind her, and that some day she would become very wealthy. But the tragic event of the last week came so suddenly and unexpectedly as to make him, for the moment, forget what it entailed.

It is a great change to occur to any one. Lady Brodhurst had barely reached

middle age, and enjoyed apparently such good health, that it is not wonderful that her children, if ever they contemplated her decease, had put the idea from them as a remote contingency. Now it is all over, and she is gone.

Iredell left his wife that morning entirely dependent on his income for her support: he returns in the evening to greet her as a rich woman, who will have no further monetary claims on himself or any one. Clare hears the intelligence without even an appearance of interest—seems to forget it, indeed, as soon as heard, which is evinced by the request she makes her husband as he is bidding her good night.

“Frank, I want to ask you a favour.”

“What is it, Clare?”

“May I keep Collins? She has been with dear mamma for the last ten years. She knew me as a little girl, and she would like to stay. You know I have never taken

very much to my new maid ; so if it can possibly be managed, I should like to keep Collins instead of her."

" My dearest girl, it is the easiest thing in the world. I will pay Roberts her month's wages, and let her depart in peace. Why should you think it necessary to ask me ?"

" Because Collins will be a more expensive servant to keep than Roberts, Frank ! Her wages are double, and she has been used to a great deal of indulgence. Poor dear mamma was so good to every one about her, and I should not like to do less for Collins than she did."

" My own Clare ! of what consideration is money compared to your comfort ? Besides, have you forgotten you have an income of twelve thousand a year ?"

The girl's brows contract with pain.

" Pray don't speak of it. Let me try and forget it. I feel as if I could never

spend a penny of it without having a stab right through my heart. Poor dear mamma! it is awful to have lost her so soon—and in so terrible a manner!"

The emotion which Dr. Mackenzie so strongly deprecates is in the ascendant, and Iredell quits the presence of his wife as soon as possible in order to discourage it.

But he feels as he does so that something is gone that was there before—something wanting which he misses for the first time—and wonders by what means he can restore it.

He has not been in the habit, as one may well suppose, of discussing the probability of her mother's death with Clare; but it has always been an understood thing between them (when sometimes they have talked of the future, which appeared such a long way off) that when Brodhurst Hall became hers, he was to leave the army, and they were to settle down there together.

" You will be an old general then, my darling," the girl had said in her loving, childish fashion ; " or perhaps a field-marshall, with long white moustaches, and such a sweet old face ; and I shall be a nice steady old lady with grey curls, who will knit soft warm socks for your gouty old feet, and give you a cup of beef-tea every night before you go to bed."

" What an inducement to be careful of my existence !" Iredell had replied, with his merry laugh ; so distant had the event which was to put them in possession of Brodhurst Hall appeared to both. And now their married life is not six months old, yet Brodhurst Hall is theirs.

Iredell does not half like the idea of giving up his profession so soon, and hopes that Clare will object to it as strongly as himself. An idle life is not at all in his line, and he is certain that the duties of

the reigning master of the Hall will not be sufficient to occupy his time with satisfaction to himself. He has ever been ardently attached to his chosen work, and a favourite with his brother officers; and he cannot contemplate what the loss of their society and the routine of military life would be to him.

But he will not worry Clare by speaking of the future at all whilst she is ill, and when the next week dawns he is thankful nothing has been said; for Dr. Mackenzie has news for him that precludes all thought of change for the present. He considers that Mrs. Iredell's health has received so serious a shock from her mother's sudden death that it is incumbent she shall remain on the sofa until the birth of her expected child.

"What—altogether!" exclaims Iredell, to whom the idea of Clare lying on a sofa for four or five consecutive months comes

almost as an announcement of perpetual invalidism.

"Yes! why not?" responds the doctor. "It is a very common occurrence, and in her case absolutely necessary. It will be nothing when she's used to it. Time passes all the more quickly for leading a monotonous existence, and I have no doubt Mrs. Iredell has plenty of friends to relieve the tedium of her temporary imprisonment. Anyway, you mustn't think of moving her from Woolwich for the present."

Iredell is quite convinced of the doctor's good sense and skill, and that his advice must be attended to, but that does not render the idea of his pretty Clare being confined to one position for so long a time any the more palatable to him. He creeps up to her bedroom after this announcement, looking very disconsolate and crestfallen, and ready to condole with his wife on the loss which Dr. Mackenzie's decision must be

to both of them—of pleasant drives and walks together, and general enjoyment of each other's company.

"Though, of course, I shall spend every moment that I can by your side, my darling," he says, eagerly; "for I shall have no pleasure in going out, or seeing any of my friends without you. I shall have the room next to this fitted up as a boudoir as soon as possible, and get a nice low couch on which you can be wheeled backwards and forwards at your pleasure."

"Ah! not that room!" cries Clare, hiding her eyes; and then he remembers that it was there that Lady Brodhurst lay dead.

"Forgive me—I forgot. Then it is my dressing-room that must serve as your temporary drawing-room, and I will use the other one myself. And I shall bring all the prettiest things from down-stairs to make it pleasant for you. The

time will not pass so *very* drearily—will it, my Clare?"

But to Iredell's astonishment, Clare, instead of being overcome by the prospect of so many months' irksome confinement, appears quite indifferent to it, if nothing more.

"Don't worry yourself about me, Frank," she says quietly; "I don't mind Dr. MacKenzie's orders, I am very happy lying here."

"It's like your sweet dear nature to pretend so, Clare, but it will be terribly trying after awhile. How I wish I could save you from it! But you must think of some nice woman friend to come and stay with you and amuse you when I am obliged to be away."

"I would rather be alone."

"You think so now because you are depressed, my darling—naturally so—but you will want to be amused again, I hope, by-and-by. What books are you reading, Clare?"

“None!”

“I’m sure I wish you would get Mrs. Iredell some nice books, sir!” here interposes Collins, who, as usual, is hovering close at hand; “for she lies there doing nothing but mope, morning, noon, and night; and it’s the worst thing possible for her, brooding over her troubles in that manner.”

“Clare, for my sake, try and rouse yourself! Think how you distress me!”

“I don’t know what you all mean,” says the girl, fretfully. “I am too weak to get up and walk about—Dr. Mackenzie says so. How can I rouse myself whilst I must lie here?”

“You can read, and try to interest your mind.”

“My eyes are too weak to read.”

“Cannot you work, dear?”

“Not in this position. Besides, I hate work.”

"You can at least love me," whispers Iredell, passionately, as he strains her to his bosom.

She suffers herself to be strained—nothing more. As he releases her, he gazes in her face. Her mournful eyes meet his, passive and uncomplaining. He stoops and kisses her. Her lips close upon his obediently, and unclose with a sigh.

Iredell echoes it, and rushes from the apartment, leaving her to the contemplation of the subject that is ever uppermost in her mind—the thought of her dead mother.

It was allowed at the commencement of this story that Lady Brodhurst was an affectionate mother—an affectionate, though an intensely selfish one. Had she lived, and continued to interfere between Clare and Iredell, by attempts to rouse the young wife's suspicions of her husband, she would probably have ended by becoming completely estranged from her daughter. But

her untimely death has altered the state of Clare's mind respecting her. All her mother's faults have disappeared behind the awful shadow that shrouds her from view. She can think now only of the love which was freely given to her maiden life; the jealousy which would have marred her married happiness fades in the background, or changes its character in the new light by which it is regarded.

Lady Brodhurst living was an interfering, jealous, and dominant old woman. Lady Brodhurst dead has become a saint—at least in her daughter's estimation. All her foibles have changed to virtues. Her meddling was anxiety for her child's welfare; her suspicions, a proof of clear-sightedness and wisdom; her doubts of Iredell *perhaps* an inspiration.

Clare has not ceased to love her husband as she lies on her couch in the twilight, but her heart is full of wretched, quivering

doubts as to how far he and she are answerable for her mother's sudden demise—she, by the indifference with which she received her maternal cautions; and he, by the crime which led to the terrible altercation that preceded her death.

If she could only make up her mind to speak openly to him on the subject, all might be well; but she cannot, for fear lest the utterance of her misery may prove his condemnation. So she lies and broods upon the past, recalling each word and look of Lady Brodhurst's from the first hour of her engagement to Iredell to the day of their marriage—all her maternal doubts and fears and reproaches—till she works herself up into a state of remorse bordering on frenzy.

"Ought I ever to have married him?" she thinks in her despair. "I love him—God knows I love him!—but can any blessing or good fortune attend an union

of which my poor mother disapproved? *I* could never have married any one else; but Frank loved several women before me, and my mother—O, my dear, good mother!—I was her first love and her last, and I deserted her for him.”

Iredell cannot help perceiving his wife's state of mind, and guesses the cause of it.

At first he hopes that a few days or weeks may restore between them the confidence they formerly enjoyed; but as time passes on, and notwithstanding all his assiduity, Clare remains obstinately silent to him on any but the most ordinary topics, he determines to broach that which he believes lies uppermost in both their hearts, and to be bold enough to mention to her the unfortunate cause of the bereavement that has overtaken them.

He seizes an opportunity when, for once, Collins has been allowed a holiday, and goes straight to the point.

“Clare, my darling, I have been wishing to speak to you alone for some days past. There is a shadow between us, Clare, and it is making me miserable.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Frank. Have I done anything wrong?”

“Nothing; but you are unhappy, and you refuse to confide in your husband.”

“How can I be otherwise than unhappy, when I have just lost my poor mother?”

“But there is something beyond that, Clare. If that were all you would lessen your grief by talking to me about it.”

“I cannot talk yet. It is too fresh.”

“Clare, do not try to deceive me. It is not your mother’s death so much as the cause of it that is pressing on your mind. It is the thought of that wretched photograph.”

“Don’t speak of it!” cries the girl, betraying herself by her excitement.

“I *must* speak of it. I must tell you

how it is that it was not destroyed amongst my other reminiscences of that time—how——”

“I refuse to hear it. I don’t wish to hear it!” exclaims Clare, passionately. “I am sick of the mention of your former loves, or of listening to your excuses on the subject. My poor mother warned me of it all before I married you, and told me what I might expect; and I was a fool to disbelieve her, or to imagine that my affection could ever have the power to redeem such an incorrigible flirt as you are.”

And as she concludes her angry reproaches, Clare bursts into tears and hides her face from him in the sofa cushions.

Iredell is infinitely shocked—for the moment almost stunned. He has never anticipated such an outburst from Clare, never thought she had it in her. His whole experience of her nature has been that of an adoring, submissive girl, who

would as soon have thought of cutting his throat as turning round upon him with such a tirade as the above. At first he is going to coax her into good humour again, but suddenly indignation gets the upper hand of him. He thinks of all the love he has displayed for his young wife; remembers how many pleasant follies he resigned for her sake; of how little he now deserves the reproaches she has cast at him; and the pride, which is an integral part of Iredell, makes him resolve to enter into no further explanations with her.

"Very good," he says, as he pushes his chair away from the sofa; "I will not trouble you with any more words upon the subject, Clare, neither now nor at any future period. Only don't forget that when I would have spoken you refused to hear me. I can make allowances for your present state of suffering; but I do not see why it should create differences between us, nor do

I deserve the accusations you have levelled against me."

"Do you mean to say you are not a flirt; that you did not make love to heaps and heaps of women before you ever set eyes upon me?" demands Clare between her sobs.

"Clare, what *I was* you knew when you married me; I concealed nothing from you. The only thing that concerns you now is what *I am*."

"I know that; but you needn't always be raking up the past, and making me miserable by alluding to it. I don't want to hear anything about those women. It is bad enough to know that they have existed, and that—that—poor mamma knew it too."

Iredell sighs deeply.

"O, Clare! don't you think *I* feel it? Heaven knows I do. It was of that I wished to speak to you, but you have closed my lips."

"Nothing can undo it," sobs Clare.

"No; nor perhaps the harm it has left behind it," says her husband. "But you will not add to our mutual misery by turning against me, will you, my Clare?"

His voice of misery touches her—she does *so* love him.

"Frank, how *could* I turn against you?"

"You love me still, my darling!"

"I have always loved you, and now—now——"

"Now we must be more than ever to each other, since we are still more mutually dependent for affection than before. Kiss me, my own love, and tell me that nothing shall ever come between us again."

She clings to him fondly, for he is the very essence of her life and being, and in the pleasure of renewed peace they appear to forget that confidence has not been restored between them. And confidence is the very soul of love, without which it has but a temporary existence.

For jealousy has awakened in Clare's bosom—a jealousy of the past which she cannot hope or expect to share. Her mother's eternal silence has hatched into life a seed that her lifelong insinuations would have failed to fructify. Out of the grave she seems to call to Clare to believe in the truth of that which hurried her there. And the poor child, between her love for Iredell and the sanctity that surrounds her mother's spiritual presence, seems to have but one alternative—to hate any allusion to the subject that has produced such discord in her mind. She adores her husband as much as she ever did—perhaps more so, with this new morbid jealousy eating into her soul—she worships the memory of the mother, who can never warn or weep over her again. But she hates the thought of this "Venus Victrix," and all the other Venuses who reigned paramount over Iredell's former

life; the women who may still divide his thoughts with her; who have been the ultimate cause of separating her mother from herself. She tries to put the haunting memory of them away, but it is ever ready to come between her husband's kisses and her own, and to poison the happiest moments of her existence.



Loring of her own free will, believing him to be suited to her in age, capacity, and temperament. She had waked up (as so many wives and husbands do) to find herself utterly mistaken—that what she had thought to be love, was passion; and good temper, indolence.

The first brief excitement of his new condition over, Andrew Loring had proved himself to possess the hardest of all natures to contend with—that of an ignorant, obstinate, and domineering man; and his wife became the most miserable of women. She can remember with a shudder, even at this distance of time, how dully and hopelessl the married days had dragged themselves out, one after another; how she had dreaded the hours to be spent alone with Mr. Loring; how she had welcomed any relief from his society, even though she obtained it surreptitiously.

She can remember how impatient she felt

of her self-imposed lot; how eagerly she claimed sympathy from the world about her—how openly she bewailed her misfortune, and told her troubles to her acquaintance.

And then, upon the stage of her past life, the woman sees the reflex of a noble face and figure—and it is at this remembrance that the tears rise to her weary eyes—of a noble heart that pitied and sympathised with her; of a generous nature that professed itself ready to give up all its prospects—its friends, profession, means, even the world itself, in order to rescue her from the lifelong bondage she had brought upon herself. She knows now—reading the past by the experience which followed it—that this man was much more the tempted than the tempter, and that it was she who, by working on his pity and indignation for her husband’s treatment of her, had thrown herself into his arms. Yet never by word of mouth, or look, or gesture, had that man

reproached her with her conduct ; not even when she had made him aware what a deluded fool he had been to take her at her word.

The scene changes, and the woman lying in the armchair at Notting Hill breathes again the warm life-giving air of Italy. She hears—as Iredell heard when he gazed upon her portrait, so suddenly placed before him—the tinkle of the sheep and goat bells as the flocks are driven homeward in the evening ; inhales the scent of lemon and orange blossoms ; listens to the whisper of the wind through the cypress trees, and feels the fresh air blowing across the Campagna. But these things pass before her only as a vision, whilst the pressure of his hand, the soft low tones of his voice, the eloquent look in his deep-grey eyes—the treasures which she cast from her into the gutter—seem as real as they did whilst she possessed them.

She recalls the luxury with which Iredell surrounded her, the pleasures they enjoyed together, the spectacles they witnessed in each other's company. But she wanted more than these. The quiet life which he thought most suitable to their peculiar position commenced to gall her. She wished to mix in society, and he considered the half-and-half society to which she alone could find entrance unfit for the woman whom he fully intended (as soon as circumstances should permit of it) to make his wife. He tried to make her contented with what seemed in her distorted vision to be lower things—with freedom of thought and mind, the pleasures of travel, his own company, and his affection for her. But she despised it all; and after awhile his loving constraint seemed as unbearable as the matrimonial fetters had been. She was a free-lance by nature, and any species of control was irksome to her.

So she made acquaintances without her lover's leave—such acquaintances as the Marchesa di Brindicci and Adolph Rambeau. And the end of it was, that just as the law had pronounced her free from her first chains, and the man who had resigned so much for her sake was ready to make the best reparation in his power, and bestow his name upon her, she left him—for the sake of greater license of speech and action, and a lower, more unbridled life ; left him, with all his great love for her thrown back upon his heart—for a mopping, mowing Frenchman, who was not worthy to have been his valet-de-chambre.

And Bertha Rambeau remembers it all to-day. It is burned in upon her memory in letters of fire.

As she traces her past life up to the time of her marriage with Rambeau, she turns uneasily in her chair, and sighs as if her heart were breaking. (But that is an error,

for it was broken years and years before.) At the same moment a dirty old woman, the mistress of the house, enters the room and lays a few scraps of greasy paper upon the table.

“Them bills have been running three weeks now, I must please to remind you,” she says, grimly; and then she puts her arms akimbo and waits for her lodger’s answer.

Madame Rambeau glances at them despairingly. Her look alone would be sufficient to move any but a heart of stone. It is so utterly hopeless. It says so plainly, “Would to God that I were dead, and out of all this!”

“It’s of no use, Mrs. Hudson,” she says in a low voice (she has left off trying to conciliate her landlady); “I can’t pay them. You must turn me out in the street, if you will, but I’ve no money.”

“And what would be the use of my turning you out in the street, ma’am, when you

owe me a matter of over five pound. When shall I see the colour of it, then, eh ? But something must be done, for I can't go on like this much longer."

"What *can* I do?" exclaims Madame Rambeau, whilst a tearing cough almost impedes her utterance ; "you see how ill I am. It is impossible for me to give any lessons ; I am almost too weak to walk to and from my bed. In another day or two I shall be there altogether, and I hope to God I may never leave it again!"

"Don't say that, for mercy's sake!" replies the landlady. "Why, to hear you talk, one would think you were rolling in riches. To leave me with a funeral on my hands, indeed, and three weeks' rent and board owing beside ! You ought to make an effort to get well and about again, if it's only to pay off what you owe. Haven't you got nothing you could sell or pawn till times get better?"

"I've pawned everything, Mrs. Hudson, as you know. I haven't an article of jewellery—hardly an article of clothing left."

"There's your bonnet and mantle."

"But what am I to wear when I get out to give my music lessons?"

"It's my belief you'll never go outside these doors again till you're carried," replies the landlady with horrid candour.

"O! I hope so! I hope so!" cries the poor creature she addresses, as she hides her worn face in her hands, and lets the hot tears trickle through her fingers.

"Well, now, it's of no use crying over it," responds Mrs. Hudson, philosophically, "and we can't none of us die more than once. Only it's quite time, ma'am, as you wrote to your friends, and made them aware of your position, and of what's likely to happen. I don't wish to be hard upon you, nor none of my fellow-creatures; but I don't like the

prospects of a death in my house, and that I tell you, plump and open."

"I am so sorry—I am so very sorry!" wails Madame Rambeau; "but I have no friends."

"You must have a father or mother, or brothers or sisters, or relations of some sort," insists her persecutor. "Where's your husband, now?"

"O! he's been dead for years."

"No friends at all? I never heard tell of such a thing; it's impossible."

"I have none to whom I could apply for money. Pray don't worry me about it. Take everything I possess, and let me go to the workhouse; but don't expect me to send to my friends for help, for it is impossible."

"Well, ma'am, something must be done," resumes the landlady, doggedly. "I must have my money, and as for your things they wouldn't fetch five shillings. It's very hard an honest woman should lose her earnings in this way."

"The bonnet and mantle will fetch more than five shillings," exclaims Bertha Rambeau, eagerly, "and there is a dressing-gown upon my bed. Take that too. It was a good one once."

"But you're up so much at night with that cough," replies the woman. "How will you manage without the dressing-gown to throw over you?"

"O! I *must* manage. Pray take it, if it will be of any use. I would much rather that you did."

The landlady annexes the articles, though, it must be said, rather reluctantly, and muttering something about the necessity of the act, disappears downstairs. As the door closes behind her, Madame Rambeau gives vent to one passionate cry of, "Frank!"

Parting with the only articles she possesses in which she can mix with the outside world seems like signing her own death warrant: and the thought of the grave, to which she

is fast hastening, contrasts so painfully with the bright, sunny scenes through which, in fancy, she was lately wandering, and the bright, sunny nature of the man who led her through them, that the present appears darker than it has ever done before.

She cries to him—him whom she betrayed and deserted—as the sinner cries to the God he has offended, confident, if not of pardon, at least of the nobility of the spirit to which he appeals. She has thought of him—Heaven alone knows how often—all through the weary years which have passed since she parted from him; but she has never dared even to contemplate the possibility of an appeal to his old affection for her till this morning—till she read the letter which she had almost forgotten in the distressing interview with the landlady. Mrs. Hudson has said she must apply to her friends; but she has no friends—none before applying to whom she would not rather lie down and die

in the gutter—unless *he*, unless Frank, who used to love her, could be induced to overlook her frailty and deceit, and stretch out a helping hand in her extremity. It is a singular fact, that out of the many men and women whom Bertha Rambeau has at times encountered and made friends with, during her passage through this world, she can only turn for help to the one whom she has most injured, with any degree of certainty that help will be accorded her.

But her belief in the nobility, generosity, and sublime tenderness of Iredell's character has never left her, even though in the face of such knowledge she could leave him.

She would not have dared, perhaps, except for the contents of the letter which she has again taken in her hand for perusal, to intrude herself upon his notice, but she would never have feared receiving anything worse from him than the indifference which she knows she has deserved.

Now, however, a glimmer of something like hope springs up in her breast as she reads over the Marchesa Brindicei's letter for the second time. It is written in French, but the translation is as follows:—

"I am truly sorry, my poor Bertha, to read an account of all the distresses you have gone through. Your England must be a terrible place to live in, and I pity you from my heart. But why do you not apply to your old friend, le beau Colonel, for a little help in this emergency? I think he will allow you have some claim upon him. Indeed, I may say I am sure he will, for I encountered him in Florence some few months since, and we had a long talk about you. He has not forgotten your *beaux yeux*, my poor Bertha, you may rest assured of that, nor do I think it would require much persuasion on your part to bring him to your feet. Write and tell him of your difficulties. You know that he is married,

though I daresay, by this time, if truth were told, he is heartily sick of his wife. I saw her once whilst walking with him, and she looked proud and cold. I do not believe he could love her as he did you. Besides, your Englishmen are terribly constant, and do not easily forget. He had the tears in his eyes when he spoke of you. Write and tell him all.. He is rich, and it will be a pleasure to him to help you, and since M. Rambeau is out of the way, the task will be quite easy. He has not forgotten the old days at Florence. *I can assure you of that, m'amie.*”

Bianca Brindicci has written the above lines more in jest than earnest, although she thinks it likely by their means that she may annoy *le beau Colonel*, in whom she professes to have so much faith. She has not forgotten the grudge she owes him for the coolness with which he received the news of her preference for himself, nor the evident distaste which he expressed at the mere

idea of Bertha Rambeau troubling the even current of his married life. She does not believe that Iredell can be already “heartily sick” of his newly-wedded wife, but having lost all hope of any happiness herself, she takes a fierce, malicious pleasure in the thought of disturbing the happiness of others, and especially of the man who has slighted her. With little goodness of heart to her own share, she does not give Iredell credit for the half which he possesses, nor believes for a moment that he will so far overlook the past as to help the unfortunate woman who betrayed him. She only smiles over the idea that if Bertha takes her advice, her appeal will come like a thunderbolt into the midst of Iredell’s domestic peace, to disturb it, perhaps, for evermore. And that she will hear it, sooner or later, and be—just a little—revenged upon him for his late behaviour to her.

But Madame Rambeau does not perceive

the jest. She takes it all in earnest. She is too utterly fallen and miserable not to grasp at the least straw of hope held out to her. She is too much upset at first by the suddenness of the proposal to believe it possible she can take advantage of it, but she does not distrust the Marchesa's motive in suggesting it, nor imagine for a moment that she wishes to use her friend's extremity as a means for carrying out any design of her own.

"Tears in his eyes as he spoke of me," Bertha thinks, with a dark flush of shame. "Is it possible that he can love and remember me still—and I left him for such a contemptible wretch as Rambeau. O! what a fool I was."

She did not love Iredell. True, deep-rooted love is not a plant of such delicate growth that it can be torn up and cast out to wither in a day. But she greatly admired him, and she admires him still. Since their

separation, and all the suffering that has followed it, she has had plenty of leisure to compare his conduct with that of the man for whom she left him, and to feel what a blind idiot she was to have cut herself adrift from a nature that would have protected and borne with her, even when it had ceased to love and honour her, for the credit of its own nobility.

And now to hear that Iredell, notwithstanding all, still cherishes some tenderness for her memory, fills her breast with the bitterest shame and anguish that it has ever known. And yet she feels that it would be less painful and humiliating to grovel at his feet (as Guinevère grovelled at the feet of Arthur) than to be raised to the breast of any one less brave and generous. And so, after a little consideration, she decides, with want and death staring her in the face, to make an appeal to her former lover.

The note as it stands, when completed, is very commonplace. Is it not generally so in this world? Here, in this miserable room, is being enacted one of the greatest tragedies of which human life is capable, and the missive which Bertha Rambeau has written will stir up the very deepest passions in a strong man's breast, and reopen the most painful wound his heart has ever received; yet had it been the commonest request possible that she made him, she could hardly have couched it in simpler language than she does.

"**M**Y DEAR FRANK,—

"I hardly know how to write to you; but I am alone and dying, and I have not a single friend in the world. If you can forgive the past, will you come to me? In a few days more it may be too late, for I am very ill.

"I have no right to ask you to come,

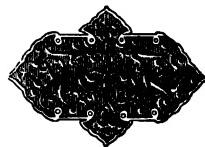
but I know of no one else who would do so.

“Yours truly,

“BERTHA RAMBEAU.”

And she sends it to the barracks of Iredell’s regiment at Woolwich.

* * * * *





CHAPTER VI.

“IREDELL TO THE RESCUE.”

IREDELL is alone when he receives it. It has been sent up from the barracks by an orderly, and it lies with other letters on his plate as he descends one morning to the breakfast-room. Breakfast is a melancholy meal to him now. Although it is still warm weather, the room always seems cold and empty without Clare, and he never enters it without remembering the last time they ever took their breakfast there together, when it was interrupted in such a dreadful manner by Lady Brodhurst's death.

He is thinking of that on the very morning that he receives Bertha's letter. He

does not recognise the writing. The poor woman's hand is feeble, and her pens and paper are of the worst kind, and he imagines her epistle to be one of the numerous appeals for charity which are being constantly sent him. But as he opens it and reads the signature, his face darkens. At first he feels nothing but anger—horrible anger and indignation; but as he takes in the sense of her communication, his feelings soften, his mind becomes perplexed, and he asks himself what he ought to do.

Two months ago he would have known exactly what to do; he would not even have waited to put the mental question, but walked straight up to Clare's room and laid the whole matter plainly before her.

But now he feels an insurmountable difficulty in even approaching the subject with his wife.

The doctor has especially ordered that her mind is to be kept as easy and undis-

turbed as possible, and all topics of excitement carefully avoided. Iredell knows that she will never cease to remember and regret the immediate cause of her mother's last illness, and how can he go to her with a letter from the original of that unfortunate photograph, and ask her advice as to whether he shall visit Madame Rambeau in her distress or not? What would any woman be likely to say under the circumstances?

Iredell, who has seen as much of the sex as most men, pulls his big moustaches thoughtfully, and knows well enough. Besides which, Clare's words when he last attempted to converse with her about it—the first unkind words she ever spoke to him—have sounded in his ears ever since:

"I am sick of the mention of your former loves, or of listening to your excuses on the subject. Poor mamma told me what I had to expect before I married you, and I was a fool to imagine that my affection could ever

have the power to cure such an incorrigible flirt as you are."

That hasty speech of Clare's has done more harm than she will find out for many a day to come. When Iredell went down on business to Brodhurst Hall but the week before, he heard a piece of news which startled him, and he thought would interest her—namely, that the old vicar, Emmy Stewart's father, had failed in some speculation in which he had sunk all the money which was to have supported his widow and children after his death, and that, in consequence, his daughters had been compelled to go out as governesses or companions to earn their own living. Iredell's kind heart had been touched to think of the bright-eyed, gipsy-faced Emmeline Stewart condemned to a life of servitude, and had wondered how soon the poor little dimpled flirt would have all her gaiety knocked out of her. He had even thought it probable

that, in the abundance of her newly-acquired riches, Clare might do something to save the girl from so unexpected a fate, by taking her as her own companion, till he had remembered his mother-in-law's doubts and inuendoes about his flirtation with her, and that the onus, whether deserved or not, would probably cling to them both for ever.

He had actually commenced to say to his wife on his return home, "O! by-the-by, I'm sure you will be sorry to hear—" when he stopped short, afraid even to mention the name of Miss Stewart before Clare, lest the remembrance should become fraught with that of another, and the doubts and warnings inevitably mixed up with it.

So now is he afraid to carry that letter of Bertha Rambeau to his wife's side, and tell her what he considers his duty to do regarding it, and that he shall be all the happier if he can procure her sanction to his proceedings. So he sits there by himself,

conning over the letter, and debating how he shall reply to it.

To tell the truth, he does not quite believe Bertha is dying. First, because it is difficult to realise death mowing down youth and beauty, unless we see it done; and secondly, because this woman has already so basely deceived him in a greater matter, that he feels he has no guarantee that she will not do it again.

All love for Bertha—even to the faintest spark—has died out of Iredell's breast. He can think tenderly of the past, but he has no pity for the present. Gentle as he is to those whom he loves, or he believes love him, he can be hard and cold as steel to the women who have betrayed or deceived him.

Yet he cannot make up his mind to leave her appeal unnoticed; he could not pass by a dog dying in a ditch without ascertaining if he could be of any help to him: and this woman, whatever she is now, was pure once,

until he met and tempted her. This is Iredell's reading of his own conduct. He resolves at first that he will write and send her money; but a second perusal of the letter makes him alter his decision.

"In a few days it may be too late, for I am very ill."

Were he to let her die, without a soul near her to close her eyes, he should reproach himself ever afterwards; for though the feeling with which he regarded her is dead, she *was* the world to him.

Iredell's heart is too generous to deny his love because it is a corpse. It is rather of that order that would cover up the dead body reverently and strew it with the sweet herb of tender recollections, and hold it sacred, not for what it is, but for what it has been.

So he settles with himself that he will go up to town and visit Madame Rambeau.

But whether to tell Clare or no is a more difficult matter to decide.

Shall he run the risk of making her ill through agitation—of encountering again those unkind speeches—of raising her suspicions respecting an action which he may never be able to make her view in the same light as he does?

Iredell, with all his love for women, has no idea of being their slave in matters which concern his own conscience and knowledge of right—what true man ever has?—nor of asking their leave to do that which his heart has already approved of to himself. He is so perfectly sure of his sentiments towards Madame Rambeau—so certain of his love for his wife and perfect faith to her—that he has no fear of acting on his own account.

Did he preserve any lingering remnant of regard for the unfortunate Bertha, he might feel a traitor as he arranged a secret mission for her relief; but as it is, he goes forth like

a hero who tramples on his own feelings for the sake of repairing, as far as lies in his power, the wrongs of which he has been guilty.

Yet so anxious is Iredell that not a thought of his heart should be unshared by the girl whom he loves as his life, that he feels like a criminal as he takes Clare in his arms, and bestows on her a few more embraces than usual, in order somewhat to ease his self-accusing conscience.

"I must leave you to-day, my own darling!" he says, fondly. "I have business in London, but I shall be down by the last train."

"Is it those horrid lawyers again, Frank?"

"Something of that sort, pet. What will my girl do to amuse herself during my absence?"

"I'm sure I don't know"—wearily—all the days seem to pass the same now.

"My poor child! I *am* so sorry for you. I will send a note round to Mrs. Treherne, and ask if she can come in and sit for an hour or two with you."

"Just as you like, dear Frank."

"I've half a mind to stay, Clare! I don't like to leave you by yourself."

"No; don't stay. It makes me seem so selfish. But if Mrs. Treherne can come and see me I shall be glad."

Iredell tears himself away from her, more than half unwilling; arranges matters in the barracks, leaves the message for Elfrida Treherne, and starts on his way to London.

As he journeys there his brain seems in a whirl, and he can scarcely disentangle his ideas sufficiently to be able to decide what he feels upon the subject.. Is it possible that he is actually on his way to see the woman on whose face he swore, seven years ago, he would never willingly set his eyes again? Is he going to speak to the crea-

ture he once almost worshipped, so firmly did he believe the beautiful casket contained a gem worthy of itself? Iredell has, in thought, to retrace all the grievous wrong this woman did him before he can school himself to meet her as she is—not *his* Bertha, whom he loved and trusted, but the Bertha of Adolph Rambeau, who degraded herself to lies and tricks and petty subterfuges, lest he should discover her treachery before the plot was ripe.

Yet yesterday he believed himself parted from her for ever in this world—never to meet until they should stand together before the seat of judgment and give account for their works done in the flesh; and to-day he is hurrying to London, with her address in his pocket, bent upon one object—that of seeing and relieving her. But his mission accomplished, he will look upon her face no more. Of that Iredell is determined. He drives straight from the railway station to

her abode. Having decided on the interview, he will go through with it at once, like an unpleasant operation that must be undergone, and is best over as soon as possible.

When he arrives at the door he asks for Madame Rambeau. The foreign pronunciation is at first unintelligible to the filthy girl who answers it.

"If it's the lodger that's dying as you want—Mrs. Rumbo her name is—you'll find her on the first-floor," calls out Mrs. Hudson, who is appealed to from the head of the kitchen stairs.

"Will you tell her that her friend, Colonel Iredell, has called to see her?"

"If you goes up the first flight you'll find her in the back room," says the girl, who has no notion of waiting upon a lodger who is behindhand with the rent; whereupon Iredell stumbles up the narrow staircase and knocks upon the door of the room indicated to him.

If any one answers, the voice is so feeble that he cannot hear it; and after a minute or two of delay, he turns the handle gently and looks in. A woman is standing by the mantelpiece, supporting herself by it: her face is towards him as he enters.

Can this be Bertha Rambeau?—this white, emaciated, shrunken face and figure, on which the ragged robes hang like cast-off clothes upon a scarecrow!

Good heavens! She was the loveliest, brightest, wickedest elf that ever beguiled a man's honest heart away from his duty. Her sylph-like figure was the perfection of rounded beauty; her glorious eyes—soft, dark, and glowing as a summer's sky illumined by stars—were the incarnation of a lover's dream; her pouting childlike mouth and coral lips, so full of innocent mischief that one forgave whatever might issue from them for the sake of seeing them at play.

And this is what she has come down to—

this is Bertha Loring—his Venus Victrix, the woman he would have died for—whose very name he once held sacred! The change is too horrible. For the first moment Iredell cannot believe it.

“Are—are you——” he commences, falteringly.

“Yes, I am Bertha,” she replies, with a ghastly attempt at a smile; and then the piteousness of the whole thing seeming to strike her, she sinks down into the chair from which she has risen to receive him, and gives way to a weak broken-down fit of weeping.

“Don’t cry—*pray* don’t cry!” he says, earnestly, his manly face growing very pale with his emotion.

She had written she was ill, and in want, and alone; but he was not prepared to find her such a shadow of her former self, clothed worse than a servant, and living in a room which appears utterly devoid of any comfort.

He draws nearer to her and takes her hand.

“I am so sorry to find you like this.”

“O! Frank! Frank!” she wails, “why did I ever leave you?”

To see the awful change in her was bad enough, but with that change to hear the old familiar name leave her lips in an agonised appeal against her erring past, completely overcomes him. The burthen of his life presses too heavily, as it does on us all at certain moments. He is happy in the present, but he can never blot out the unpardonable past, and the earth grows very dark. He bows his head upon her hand, and the burning tears rise to his hidden eyes.

“Have you forgiven me?” she says, presently.

“Forgiven you! poor soul. Who am I that I should dare to say no? I felt it, Bertha, bitterly, but we have both had our

punishment here, and the rest we must leave to God. Yes! I forgive you freely. Don't let any fear of that make your illness more distressing than it is."

For, few as her words to him have been, the racking cough has interrupted them too often.

"You were always so good, and I—I was not worthy of you!" says Bertha, in a whisper. She raises herself to look at him as she speaks, but the exertion is too much for her, and she falls back again in a dead faint.

Iredell looks round the miserable apartment in despair. There is not even a glass of water in view. He goes to the head of the staircase and calls out—

"Here! Madame Rambeau is ill. Bring some water—quick!"

"Be she off again?" demands the dirty girl, indifferently, from the passage.

"She has fainted. Make haste!"

"O! she does that twenty times a day. There's a crock of water on the first landing; you can take some of that if you like, but she'll come to of herself if you leave her alone. She's used to it!"

Disgusted by her want of sympathy, Iredell, having procured some of the water, returns to the sitting-room, opens the dirt-encrusted window, and after having watched poor Bertha for some anxious minutes, hears again the hacking cough that announces her return to consciousness.

"Are you better now, Birdie?" he inquires, as she opens her eyes.

It is the name by which he was used to call her in their happiest days, and it leaves his lips unconsciously. How difficult it is to school ourselves to forget that which has been once familiar to us! We may force ourselves in public, or during absence, to speak of our former idol as Mrs. Brown or Mr. Jones; but bring us face to face and

alone, and the old familiar appellations drop from our tongues as glibly as ever they did in the dear days departed. Iredell neither loves nor respects the woman before him, but he cannot forget that she has been his.

"I shall never be better," she answers, with a sigh. "I am dying, Frank, and it is very, very hard to go out of the world alone."

"Are you really alone?"

"Really, and have been for the last four years."

"How have you lived?"

"By giving music lessons. But this cough, which came on the winter before last, has made me gradually give up one pupil after another, till I have none left. And now I do not live at all—I starve."

His generous heart is melted with compassion for her, but his next words are stern.

"Where is M. Rambeau, then?"

"I don't know. He went to America,

I believe. I have heard nothing of him since."

"The scoundrel!"

"You may well say that. Hard as my life has been, I would rather have gone to the workhouse than returned to him."

"Poor Birdie! The exchange was not such a good one, then, after all?"

She looks up into his face appealingly.

"O, Frank! if you knew what I have suffered you would pity me. When I think of all I threw away; when I remember how you loved me, unworthy as I was; how you took me away from that brute Loring, who was crushing all the joy and brightness out of my young life, and—"

"Hush! hush! I cannot bear that you should speak of that now. It is all past and gone; let us try and forget it. Only one thing, Birdie. You know, do you not, that I was quite prepared to do my duty

by you? That as soon as ever your divorce had been pronounced absolute, I should have made you my wife in the face of the world?"

"*Know it!*" she exclaims, as passionately as her feeble state will admit of; "of course I know it. I know that you were the most noble and loving and honourable of men, and that I was a base, wicked, intriguing woman, utterly unworthy of all the sacrifices you would have made for me. You were too good for me; you were a thousand times too good for me!"

"I cannot have you say that, Birdie. It is neither true nor just. We both sinned grievously, but I the worst of the two. I was the elder—supposed to be the stronger—and I led you astray."

"You did not. I brought it entirely on myself. Don't you remember the letter I sent you before you had ever thought of me in that way, and the appointment I asked

you to make with me after the ball at Portsmouth?"

"Do not let us recall those times," he answers, gently; "they can do no good, and they hurt me terribly."

It is true—as true as that they are sitting there once more together—that this woman had thrown herself in his way, until she had so far compromised herself that there was no refuge for her but his protection. But though Iredell knows it, he will not allow his poor frail companion to accuse herself. He will take the entire blame now as he took it then, before the world as well as amongst his friends.

"I was a short-sighted, selfish fool," he goes on. "I saw you ill-treated and unhappy, and I believed myself capable of making up to you for the loss of name and character and friends. But I failed, as you know, and am willing to believe that some deficiency in myself, or my knowledge

of you, led to the catastrophe that parted us. But though I was very bitter against you, Birdie, and swore never to see or speak to you again, I did hope that the man who took you from me had obtained a stronger hold upon your love than I had been able to do."

"O, no! O, no!" she says, more wearily than sadly, as though she had thought it all over years before, and grieved until she had lost the power of grieving. "My fickle nature rebelled against the secluded life you wished me to lead, and Rambeau promised me all the gaiety which I desired."

"And my love went for nothing," he says, reproachfully.

"O, Frank! I never thought about it until I lost it. I did not know its value until it was gone for ever. Don't speak of it; pray, don't speak of it, or you will break my heart!"

"You know that I am married."

"Have you told your wife about me?" she inquires, with quick shame.

"Could I have married her honourably *without* telling of you?" he replies, gravely. "But she does not know your name, nor where you live; you might have been sure of that. Duty compelled me to confess my own fault, but not yours."

"Does she know of your visit here to-day?"

"She does not. It is the first concealment I have had from her, and it makes me uneasy. But she is not well at present, and I was afraid the news might agitate her."

"She loves you?"

"Thank God—*yes!*" he rejoins, with a fervour that strikes sadly on his listener's ear.

"She will not leave you for some other man?"

"Leave me! If you knew her you would

not mention such a subject in connexion with her name. She has the purest, most innocent, childlike heart that ever beat in the breast of a woman."

"And I was so bad, and impure, and unworthy," sobs poor Bertha.

"O! Birdie! don't talk like that. I meant no reflection upon you, poor child. Your education, your surroundings, your life, were all so different from hers. Try and forget that we were ever more to one another than we are now. Look upon me as a friend come to your relief, and don't let these miserable reminiscences of a dead past mar the little good I may be able to do you."

"Ah! it is easy for *you* to speak like that," says Bertha.

She is right. It is easy for the man, prosperous and happy in his present love, and thankful that that unpleasant episode in his life, of which she was the heroine, is

past and done with for ever, to forgive the share she took in it. The very fact that he *can* forgive, and urge her to regard him as a friend, is proof positive that he no longer regrets her infidelity to himself. But she has lost everything ; and looking back from the brink of the dark grave to the sunny paradise she held so cheaply, has all her hours at leisure, poor soul, for unavailable regrets.

Iredell does not take any notice of her last remark. The allusions to his wife have recalled to his remembrance the reason for which he is there.

"We must not forget the object of my visit to you," he says, presently. "Tell me frankly how you stand, Bertha. Have no scruples in the matter. I am a rich man, and shall feel it no less my duty than my pleasure to assist you."

"I have nothing to tell you, Frank—that is, about myself. You see all that there is

to see. I don't think I shall live many days longer; but that is quite as well, as I have not a shilling in my pocket, nor an article of clothing except in what I stand!"

"Good God! Birdie!—can it be as bad as that? Who is your doctor?"

"I have had no doctor. I used to go to the hospital for advice when I was stronger, but I am too weak to walk now."

"What have you had to eat to-day?"

"Nothing!" she answers in a faint voice; "but that is of little consequence, for I can't eat."

"And I have been selfishly wasting the time talking to you, when I should have been acting instead. Birdie! the first thing you must let me do is to fetch a doctor to see you."

"Is it worth while, Frank?"

"I cannot tell, but I shall not be satisfied until I have done so. Forgive my leaving

you abruptly, but I shall not be gone more than a few minutes.”

He seizes his hat as he speaks, and stumbles down the dark stairs. The members of the medical profession abound in Notting Hill, and it is really, as Iredell said, not more than a few minutes before he is back again, with a skilful practitioner at his heels.

The doctor examines poor Bertha thoroughly, whilst her hacking cough is the only sound that breaks the silence; and Iredell stands at the little window looking out upon the strip of ground at the back of the house, and wondering at the chances that have brought him to that spot.

“ You must tell me exactly what is best to be done for Madame Rambeau, doctor,” he says, when the examination is concluded. He has told him briefly whilst coming there that she is the widow of an old friend of his, who has been left destitute,

and that he is prepared to take all expenses that may be necessary for her on himself. The doctor turns and confronts him. Iredell reads complete hopelessness in his eyes, though his cheerful tones belie his looks.

“ Well, the first thing I recommend for Madame, Colonel Iredell, is a more comfortable apartment. This is scarcely fit for an invalid. Whilst you are procuring it, I will stay by her side and administer a cordial that will give her strength for the effort of moving.”

“ Is it worth while ?” repeats poor Bertha, with a struggling ray of hope in her eyes.

“ Worth while !” says the doctor, in a loud, cheery tone. “ I should think it *was* worth while ! Why, we shall have you looking quite a different creature in a day or two !”

“ But I’ve no bonnet to go in !” she says, with feminine anxiety as to her appearance ;

and then she flushes, remembering where the bonnet and mantle have gone, and turns towards Iredell for help out of her difficulty, as she used to turn in the olden days.

“Never mind; I’ll see to that, Bertha!” he replies.

She beckons him to her side, and whispers in his ear—

“They’re pawned, Frank! The woman has the tickets.”

“Hush! I will arrange everything. Don’t you worry yourself. Trust to me.”

O! how sweet it seemed to be told to trust to him, as she used to be told long ago. But with all his kindness there is something in Iredell’s look that tells her, more powerfully than words, that it is pity alone dictates his present care for her.

He prepares to leave the house again, in search of some apartments the doctor has recommended him; and under pretence of

giving him further directions as to the locality of which, he follows Iredell to the head of the staircase.

"Take them by the week," he whispers. "She wont last out the fortnight; but don't tell the landlady that, as they've always an objection to a funeral in the house."

These words ring sadly in Iredell's ears as he goes on his charitable errand. Yet what better fate can he wish for her--poor creature!—than to leave a world where she has proved herself so lamentably weak!

The apartments are admirable—a large well-furnished bed-room and sitting-room opening into each other, and situated in a quiet terrace, apart from the general thoroughfare.

Iredell impresses the landlady most favourably by paying the first week's rent in advance; and having ordered fires, and every comfort that he thinks Madame

Rambeau may require, walks to the nearest mews, and is back at Bertha's poor lodging, with a private brougham, before either she or the doctor expected his return.

He finds the patient looking wonderfully better. Excitement and some stimulant the doctor has been administering to her have lent her an artificial strength which seems almost miraculous.

"A brougham!" she exclaims, as Iredell enters the room and announces it is ready for her. "O! how good you are—but how can I go through the streets like this?"

"I've brought you these," he answers carelessly, placing a bundle on the table. "I don't know if they are right, for I was obliged to take whatever the woman gave me; but I thought they might do just to go from this house to the next."

She is still woman enough—poor Bertha! —to be delighted with the presents—

a Cashmere morning robe, faced with quilted satin, a long black silk cloak lined with fur, and a hood to match it—the very things for an invalid to take a journey in.

“I will put them on!” she exclaims, as she attempts to pass with her burthen into the next room. But the fictitious strength she has acquired is treacherous, and she nearly falls on the way.

“Take care!” cries the doctor, catching her and supporting her to her destination; “you are not quite strong again yet, remember!”

“That is always the way with her disease,” he remarks to Iredell when the door is closed between them. “Your coming and my medicine have produced a temporary reaction, but she will last none the longer for it.”

“Will it do her harm?”

“Nothing can do her harm now. You may give her anything to eat or drink she

fancies. The lungs are utterly destroyed. It is merely a question of so many days."

"You will attend her to the last?"

"Certainly; if you wish it. She has seen better days, I suppose?"

"Yes; she has seen better days," replies Iredell, simply.

"Doctor," says the feeble voice from the next room, "I am ready now."

The doctor goes to her assistance and brings her into the sitting-room again, looking quite transformed by her new attire. Mrs. Hudson (who has had all her claims satisfied previously) stands curtseying in the passage as her lodger passes over her threshold, her estimation of her greatly raised by the appearance of the two gentlemen who support her to the carriage.

As Bertha sinks down upon the comfortable sofa awaiting her in the new apartments, and finds a neat-looking servant waiting to attend upon her and to ask

what she may require for sustenance, the change appears too great to believe in, and she leans her worn face against the cushion, whilst tears of weakness and gratitude course themselves silently down her cheeks.

"You will not leave Madame Rambeau to-night, I trust, until you have established a nurse by her side," says Iredell to the doctor, who is bustling about, opening a bottle of brandy for his patient, and ordering the landlady to send up some arrowroot immediately.

"I will attend to it directly Madame has swallowed a little nourishment. She has borne the journey bravely, far better than I expected; but I should like to see her take some arrowroot before I leave. I know of an excellent woman who will attend her like a mother. You will naturally feel more comfortable, Colonel, if you leave her in good hands."

It is a silent interval that Iredell and

Bertha pass whilst the doctor goes upon his errand. In the first place, the maid-servant is present; in the second, the woman is too much exhausted by the exertion she has undergone, and the sensations of shame, humiliation, and gratitude for the noble return the man has made for her treachery to and desertion of him to be able to do more than lie still and swallow her rising emotion. Before Iredell takes his departure he witnesses the arrival of an experienced, matronly-looking nurse, to whose particular care he not only confides his sick friend, but to whom he gives *carte blanche* to provide her with everything she may require.

"Madame Rambeau has been too ill to look after her wardrobe lately. Get her anything she may need for comfort, and mind she wants for nothing."

To Birdie herself—poor Birdie, beaten down by the pitiless storm of life, and

lying on the ground with drenched feathers and broken wings—he only says, with a shake of the hand—

“Good night, Bertha. I trust you may rest well and have a brighter waking! Your good friends here will, I know, pay you every attention in their power.”

“You will come again?” she gasps, with weak, imploring eyes raised to his.

“Yes, I hope so; in a few days, perhaps,” he answers, vaguely.

“O! doctor, tell him that a few days will be too late!” she says, piteously.

“Nonsense, madame! I shall tell him nothing of the sort. Mrs. Bond here will testify to the fact that I speak nothing but the truth. A few days; rubbish!”

But to Iredell he adds in a lower key—

“Come soon, if you want to see her again.”

“I have something of *great* importance

to tell you. I must see you again before I die," says Bertha.

"I will come the day after to-morrow," Iredell replies briefly; and then he passes out of the room, glad to make his exit before the nurse and doctor so as to avoid speaking to Madame Rambeau again alone.

But all these arrangements have occupied so many hours that, as he turns into the street and consults his watch, he finds he has but just time to catch the last train that will take him to Woolwich that night.





CHAPTER VII.

"ADDY BECOMES PIOUS."

AHILST Francis Iredell is fulfilling his errand of mercy, his wife is passing the day in what appears to her to be a very flat, stale, and unprofitable manner. To spend half one's time in one position is inevitably trying to a young and energetic nature. Clare wishes twenty times a day that she had not grown so fast and so slight, and was able to walk about and take the same exertion as other women. To lie on the sofa for hours together, with an occasional walk to the window to stretch her limbs, has become very wearisome to her. She longs to get out into the fresh air, to drive into the country, to do a

little shopping ; anything, in fact, that her fidgety little doctor has ordered she shall *not* do, so tired is she of obedience and constraint. She has the newest of books and needlework provided for her, and every dainty to tempt her appetite ; but the only hours she really enjoys are those which Iredell's duties permit him to pass by her side, when he throws himself down by her couch and lays his head upon her tender, girlish breast, and she holds him tight to her heart and is happy.

For nothing that Clare has thought or feared from the dark insinuations Lady Brodhurst left behind her has had the power to alter the devoted love she bears her husband. On the contrary, the dread of a possible loss has made her cling to him more closely than before. Her love, through jealousy, may cause her suffering, but nothing can make it less.

But Clare has to pass this day without

one hope of seeing Frank, and the hours drag themselves out more wearily than usual. She tries to read and to work, but both operations become irksome in her constrained position; and then, to make matters worse, the photographer sends home a dozen copies of the last likeness taken of her mother, and Clare cries over them till she has made her head ache.

"Will this horrid day never be done?" she says to Collins, fretfully. "It seems like twenty-four hours since the Colonel left for London, and the train by which he said he should return arrives long after I shall be in bed."

It never rains but it pours. Clare has scarcely finished her melancholy exordium before a three-cornered note is brought up to her room. It is from Mrs. Treherne, expressing her regret at not being able to come and see her in consequence of being about to start by the evening mail from

London on a visit to her father and sister in Scotland.

"It's just like my luck," sighs poor Clare; "now I shall be alone all the evening. You had better go down to your tea, Collins. I don't want anything at present. No, don't light the candles; I like to lie in the dusk and think."

Which, put into plain English, means that Clare is in for a regular fit of low spirits, and intends to indulge them without reserve. The maid is very unwilling to leave her alone, but has no alternative but to obey her mistress's orders. In a few minutes she returns, however, with rather an excited countenance.

"O! if you please, ma'am, there's Mrs. Seymour below, and she's got the most beautiful bunch of flowers for you, and she wants so much to come up and see you, and do let me ask her, for I'm sure it'll do you good."

Clare's first impulse is to reply in the negative. She has not seen Addy Seymour since her mother's death, and the remembrance of the shirts, and the dubious stories about Calcutta (albeit Frank has denied the truth of them since), recurs rather unpleasantly to her mind. Still, she is ill and dull and anxious for a little company, and Addy Seymour has never any lack of conversation. Clare is still uncertain whether to say "yes" or "no," when the matter is decided for her.

"Mayn't I come in just for one moment, dear Mrs. Iredell?" demands a soft voice at the open door. Mrs. Seymour has followed Collins upstairs, and is standing on the very threshold of her room.

"*Do* let me come in!" she reiterates.

"O! of course," replies Clare, secretly pleased at the intrusion. "I have been alone all day, without a soul to speak to."

"Have you really? Poor child! And how are you getting on, dear? Well?"

"Very well, thank you! I hope the doctor will not keep me a prisoner for ever. O! what beautiful flowers."

The summer is melting into autumn now, and flowers are getting scarce, yet the bouquet Mrs. Seymour holds is bright with hothouse blossoms.

"Are they not? I received them as a present fresh from the country to-day, and brought them round to you at once. I thought they would brighten up your room."

"How kind of you to think of me. But it seems a shame to rob you of them. A present, too!"

"My dear! I should not have half the pleasure keeping them for myself. And as for kindness—I should have been to see you weeks ago, had I not thought it kinder to keep away."

This apparent consideration, so novel a trait in Addy Seymour's character, touches Clare more than the gift of the flowers.

"Thank you! I have not had much spirits for company lately. But it is very dull lying here for so many hours alone. Now you *are* come, Mrs. Seymour, I hope you will stay to tea. I keep invalid's hours now, and dine early."

"O! I shall be charmed," replies Addy, commencing at once to disencumber herself of her walking attire; whilst Collins, delighted at her young mistress having a friend to sit with her, disappears to issue orders for the desired meal.

Mrs. Seymour, having arranged matters to her own satisfaction, sits down by the sofa, takes Clare's hand in her own, and looks sympathetic.

"And so you lie here all day?"

"Pretty nearly so. Dr. Mackenzie thinks it necessary for my health."

"Ah! well. Health is the first consideration; and then you have not only yourself to think for now, remember."

Clare blushes scarlet, half with shame and half with pleasure. The event in the future is still so new an idea to her, she has not quite realised it. It is only a hope at present, but a hope she would not part with for the world."

"Who told you?" she says, shyly.

"My dear! Colonel Iredell's face proclaims it wherever he goes. It positively shines like the rising sun when your name is mentioned. He is evidently very proud of his coming honours, and of his wife into the bargain."

"Dear Frank!" murmurs Clare, softly.

"But it grieves me deeply to see you in this," continues Addy, as she touches the girl's mourning dress; "you have suffered an irrevocable loss."

"I assure you I feel it so," she replies, with quivering lips.

"May I speak to you of it? It seems as though I must tell you what I feel. I

never was so shocked in my life as when the news reached me. That fine, amiable, courteous creature, with the face of a Juno and the air of a queen, cut off at a blow! It appeared impossible. So good, too, as she seemed to be!—so affectionate, so clever!"

"She was indeed! she was all that you say," cries Clare, forgetting—in her pleasure at hearing her mother praised—to feel any surprise that the praises should emanate from Mrs. Seymour's lips. "She was the best and fondest mother—we never had a quarrel in our lives, nor hardly an unkind word. It seems impossible she should be gone for ever. Sometimes I can hardly believe it, even now!"

"Don't cry, dear! you might do yourself harm, though I cannot wonder at your feeling any amount of grief for such a loss. I liked her so much—I looked up to and reverenced her so! Her opinions were so just, her views so accurate, one seemed to

be always learning something from her lips. She was a wonderful woman. And though she didn't like *me*, dear—and I could hardly be surprised at that, you know, when I felt myself to be so inferior to her in all things—yet I liked her, I would say I *loved* her, if I dared."

"I wish you wouldn't imagine that she disliked you," interposes Clare—almost thinking as she listens to Addy Seymour's enthusiastic speech, that her sainted mother must, for once in her life, have been wrong in her estimation of her. "It distresses me, and dear mamma hardly ever disliked anybody in her life—she was so just and good to all."

"My dear girl, I know it—I felt it. But perhaps even her little coolness towards me was only justice. I know I am a flighty creature, and say things on occasion without thinking, that I am quite ashamed to remember afterwards. And then I have not

shared in the same high virtues as your dear
late mother did. I have lived in a freer,
more ~~and~~ ^{less} conscientious, and I fear, more
than that I wounded her sensibilities by
my carelessness. You don't try to excuse
me, my dear Clara—I was wrong! I frankly
admit it—but if that dear saint looks down
from Heaven at this moment on us both, she
knows how grieved I am that it should have
been so."

Clara's tender heart is touched. She
steps down and kisses Mrs. Seymour on the
cheek. She does not recognise the insin-
cerity of her friend's new mood: she only
hears her laud her beloved mother, and is
grateful to her for it.

"I am sure if there was anything to
forgive," she says, gently, "mamma has for-
given it long ago. She never cherished re-
sentment on earth: I am sure she would
not do so in Heaven!"

"Bless her! I hope and trust not," ex-

claims Addy, fervently. "But I saw she was vexed with me the last time we met, and have often cried over it since."

"It was not much," says Clare, eagerly. "It was about the shirts you made for Frank, and your meeting him in Calcutta. Dear mamma was so anxious for my happiness, and so fearful lest anything should disturb it, that she thought more about such trifles than I should have done. Besides, in the last century, you know, ladies and gentlemen were not used to be so familiar with each other as they are now, and she cherished a good many old-fashioned notions about reticence and propriety. I daresay her ideas appear unnecessarily strict in these days, but she had complete faith in them herself."

"And how beautiful they are!" exclaims Mrs. Seymour. "How true, how honourable, how womanly! What can be more in accordance with purity and modesty,

and religion—of which dear Lady Brodhurst's life seemed to be so excellent an exponent—than the strict views she held and acted up to. Ah ! my dear Clare, don't fall into the error of thinking that because I appear to be a worldly, frivolous creature, I cannot appreciate such a woman as your sainted mother. She was too good for this world!"

The fact is, that Lady Brodhurst, instead of being a pious exponent of the doctrines of her religion, was as worldly-minded and carnally-disposed an old lady as is to be found within the confines of the United Kingdom.

But Clare, grieving over her sudden loss, and having already deified her mother's memory until it has lost all resemblance to its earthly prototype, is quite ready to accept Mrs. Seymour's "blarney" as a true and unbiassed opinion. It is strange, she thinks to herself, but no one, not even

Frank, has so truly estimated her dear mother's character as Mrs. Seymour does.

"And now, let me be frank with you," continues Addy, in a gush of artificial fervour; "let me tell you the whole truth about those unfortunate shirts. How I wish I had burned all the stuff in the fire before, in my girlish indiscretion, I had determined to win that unlucky bet!"

"What bet?" cries Clare, in amazement.

"Wait a minute and I will tell you, dear. I know dear Lady Brodhurst must have thought it strange that I should have made shirts for a gentleman who was positively *nothing* to me, beyond the childish companion you have heard of. Well, dear, it was on this wise. There were a lot of us, all girls, out in Calcutta together, and most of the men who were newly arrived there had made the usual mistake of taking out clothing much too heavy for the climate. So we girls all said we'd get up

a ‘bee’ (you have heard of the ‘sewing bees’ in America, haven’t you, dear?) and provide our particular friends with their cambric shirts. Well, I was always a foolish thing—wild and headstrong. Ah! how bitterly I have paid for my thoughtlessness in this last sad experience——”

“Don’t think of it!” says Clare, consolingly.

“It is very kind of you to say so, but if I live to a hundred I shall never forgive myself for having caused that sweet woman a moment’s annoyance. Well, as I was saying—I was very wild, and proud of my needlework, and I boasted of my ability, and declared I could make a dozen shirts whilst my companions were making six. One lady—a Mrs. Nelson—dared me to try for a bet of five pounds. It’s very vulgar to bet, dear, and of course I never do such a thing now; that was the first and last time, but my vanity was touched, and

I accepted and won it. I had made the cambric shirts before I told Colonel Iredell of what I had engaged to do, and he said, jestingly, ‘You had better make the other half-dozen of flannel then, for I shall be at home, thank Heaven, by this time next year. (He was so delighted to leave India, dear, he hated the country so—he had no one to care for him there.) So, upon that hint, I completed the set of shirts in flannel, and won my five pounds—not that I cared for the money, dear, but for the honour and glory of the thing. So that is the real history of your husband’s shirts, and I am sure I wish he had thrown them all to his servant before they had been suffered to breed any vexation for your dear mother.’

“She wasn’t vexed; she only thought it strange,” repeats Clare, who feels quite satisfied now that Frank is right, and no love passages have ever taken place between

himself and Mrs. Seymour. Not that he said so!

If Clare examined Addy's words critically, and compared them with her former history of the shirts, she too would find the discrepancies in them strange. But subsequent events have almost driven the first story out of her head, and there is something about Mrs. Seymour's manner and speech to-night that carries conviction with it.

The elder woman, perceiving what an error she made with regard to Lady Brodurst, has completely altered her tack, and the younger one is credulous enough to be taken in by it. She never knew that Addy Seymour could carry such a modest, self-reproachful, not to say pious, air about her before, and her suspicions are lulled to sleep by the change. She begins to think Lady Brodurst must have been mistaken; she is quite sure *she* has been.

By the time tea is served, Addy Seymour

is quite re-established on her old terms of familiarity, and, thinking they have had enough for the present of the immaculate dead, turns to a livelier topic.

“And where is Colonel Iredell to-day?” she asks, as they discuss the meal together.

She has been most careful not to let his Christian name, issuing from her lips, jar once upon his wife’s ears that evening. It is a small circumstance—so small that Clare does not even notice it—but she feels there is an absence of discord somewhere, and that Addy’s voice sounds pleasanter than it used to do.

“He is gone to town on business,” she replies.

“How tiresome for you! You must miss him terribly.”

“I do, but it can’t be helped. Law business is horridly tedious and incomprehensible.”

"But all the law business relating to your estates, et-cetera, has to pass through your hands, I suppose? Forgive me if I am wrong, but you are heiress in your own right, are you not?"

"I am! I wish I were not," says Clare, simply.

"Don't wish that, my dear. A married woman cannot be too independent. The fact serves to keep her husband in order."

"But I should not care for a husband who could be kept in order by that means. Besides, I would much rather owe everything to Frank than have the money called mine; I think it's horrid——"

"Many have thought the same, my dear—at first. You haven't been married a year yet, remember. I knew a Mrs. Bowman once—such a nice woman, so handsome and clever, and she perfectly adored her husband. I never saw a wife make a greater fool of herself than she did. Well,

when she came into some money, nothing would satisfy her but that it must all be settled upon Mr. Bowman. She wasn't going to appear to distrust her darling husband—what was hers was his, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera—and she wouldn't touch a farthing of the money till it was made over to him."

"I should like to do just the same," says Clare.

"Wait till you hear the sequel. The transfer was made, and everything went right for a year or two. At the end of that time, Mr. Bowman having got somewhat tired of domestic life, walked off to America with another woman, and left his wife and children to get on as best they could. Poor Ella came to me with a face as long as a hatchet. 'O, what a fool I was to transfer that money to Robert's name!' she said. 'He's never been the same man since; and now he's taken every halfpenny with him, and left me to starve!'

And that's not an uncommon case, my dear, you may take my word for it."

Clare appears more amused than otherwise at the story. It seems such an impossible thing that Iredell and she should ever have a separate interest.

"Have you seen Lord Burgess lately?" demands her friend, after a pause.

"Lord Burgess! O dear no! How could I?"

"Why not? You have transformed this room into a very pretty boudoir, and to see a little company occasionally would do you all the good in the world. Of course you would not admit *everybody*, but to receive an intimate friend or two would surely be no harm."

"But Lord Burgess is not an intimate friend of mine."

"Is he not?" replies Addy, carelessly; "to hear him talk of you one would certainly think he was."

"How does he talk?" demands Clare, curiously.

"My dear, he doesn't talk—he *raves*. I've had enough of it, I can assure you. One would think there wasn't another woman in the world beside yourself. Your hair, your eyes, your expression, your figure, they are all the very acme of perfection, according to Lord Burgess."

"O! how very silly of him. What can make him go on in so ridiculous a manner?"

"Why, he's head over ears in love with you. Any fool could see that!"

"*In love with me!*" repeats Clare, with the hot blood dyeing her shame-faced countenance. "O! please don't talk like that, Mrs. Seymour; it would make Frank so angry!"

"Why should he be angry? Does he imagine no one has any eyes but himself? It's the penalty a man has to pay for possessing a pretty wife. However, talk-

ing or no talking wont alter facts, and the whole garrison knows that Lord Burgess is crazy about you."

"I wish you hadn't told me of it, Mrs. Seymour. I mustn't be rude to him, because he's in Frank's regiment, but I feel as if I could never meet Lord Burgess again. What *can* have made him do it? I have scarcely spoken more than half a hundred words to him since I have been in Woolwich."

"But have you never guessed he liked you? I'm sure I thought he showed it plainly enough the evening after he dined here."

"How should I guess it?" cries Clare, in distress. "You do not suppose he would dare to hint at such a thing to me?"

Yet as she speaks she remembers the song of "Blue eyes or brown," and the remark Lord Burgess made after she had sung it on that very evening.

“Please drop the subject,” she continues presently. “You would make me hate Lord Burgess if I thought you were in earnest, and I don’t think my husband would like me to joke upon so serious a matter.”

“Perhaps not; so I will be mum. Men who have seen a great deal of the world themselves are generally the most particular about their wives. I knew a fellow once—Major Marchant by name—who would hardly allow his wife to speak to a man. I never met such a tyrant in my life. She was no beauty either, so he need not have been afraid; but he never let her go anywhere without him, nor admit a gentleman visitor during his absence. The poor woman led the life of a dog with him. Well, only fancy! when he died it was discovered that he had been keeping up a nice little establishment all for himself, somewhere out in the suburbs, and there was a fine scene in the legitimate house-

hold with the two women going at each other tooth-and-nail over the dead body, and disputing the honour of burying it. Of course the wife won the day *then*, but it was a question which was the victorious party. We women get the worst of it in *this* world, my dear, there is no doubt of that; let us hope it may be made up to us in the next. But I've tired you."

"No; but I don't like to hear such stories. I think of them afterwards. Surely there are not many people so bad as you say?"

Addy perceives she has played a wrong card, and hastens to remedy the error.

"Perhaps not, dear; at least *I've* known many excellent ones, both men and women. There's your husband and mine, for instance, to say nothing of the dear creature that's just gone. O! you have had your piano moved up here, I see. Shall I sing to you?"

"I don't think I could bear any lively music just yet," murmurs poor Clare.

"*Lively*, dear!" with an intonation of mild reproach. "I should think not. Do you imagine for a moment I would have proposed it? But I thought a sacred song or two might soothe and comfort you."

"Do you sing sacred songs?" asks Clare, with surprise.

Somehow, there appears an incompatibility between Addy Seymour and sacred music.

"I sing something of everything," replies her companion; which is indeed true, for she is "all things to all men," and cannot afford to be found wanting in any expedient to maintain her various *rôles*.

So she commences to sing some sweet namby-pamby, half-religious song, with sentimentally sacred words set to a sort of Christy Minstrel air; but the music sounds pleasant in Clare's ears, and her thanks keep Addy at the instrument for more than an hour.

"Why, I declare it is ten o'clock!" she exclaims, looking at her watch; "and Colonel Iredell will be home in a few minutes, and scolding me for having kept you out of bed. I must be off at once."

"O! stay a little longer," pleads Clare; "Frank will not be here till the last train."

"No, dear! I had better go. I never like to outstay my welcome. Besides, my dear old Henry will be wanting me. He's a perfect baby unless I am at his elbow. Good night, dear; God bless you. I believe you are looking just a wee bit brighter for my visit. I am so glad I took courage to come."

"You will come again soon, wont you? —for Mrs. Treherne has gone to Scotland, so I shall be almost dependent on yourself for an occasional visit."

"O! she's in Scotland, is she? And no great loss either, I should imagine. My dear, Elfrida Treherne is as dull as ditch-

water when you're left alone with her; she'd set you moping in a week. She's so frightfully proper. As for poor me, I do not believe she would ever ask me to her house, excepting that I sing. Now, don't ring! I can find my way downstairs, and I wont steal anything from the drawing-room. Good night!" And without further discussion off she flies.

When Iredell returns from London, at some time past midnight, he is surprised to find Clare still sitting up to receive him.

"My darling, you should have been asleep long ago," he says as he takes her in his arms, with an outspoken thanksgiving that all the past is done with, and the present is so pure and good and true.

"O ! I'm not a bit sleepy, Frank dear, and I've had the most charming evening. Fancy ! who has been here ?"

"Mrs. Treherne, I hope."

"No ! she couldn't come. She has gone

to Scotland by the night mail. Guess again?"

"I can't guess. I did not know there was another lady in Woolwich with whom you would care to spend the evening."

"You'll never guess, because you think I don't like her; but she made herself so pleasant, and we had such delightful talks about poor mamma and all sorts of things. Mrs. Seymour!"

"Addy Seymour!" ejaculates Iredell, with a fallen face. "Why, I thought you were at daggers drawn with her?"

"O, Frank! what an expression! I didn't like her much at first, I confess, because I did not know how much good there is in her. But if you had heard the affectionate manner in which she talked this evening of my poor darling mother and her own husband, and the nice way in which she mentioned religion, you would have been astonished."

"I am sure I should."

"Now, Frank, you're sarcastic, and I don't think that's right. Everybody has *some* good qualities in them, you know, and perhaps you've never had the opportunity of seeing the best of Mrs. Seymour. She quite took me by surprise to-night. And she sung such beautiful hymns too, and with such fervour—quite as if she felt them."

"Well, my darling, I don't like Addy Seymour, as you know; but if she has amused you and made the day appear less dreary, I owe her my thanks. But I hope Mrs. Treherne wont remain in Scotland long; I prefer her as a companion for you. And now let's go to bed, for I'm very tired."

"What have you been doing all day, dear? Tell me everything from the very beginning."

"Not to-night, Clare—it is too late."

"Where did you dine?"

"I've not dined at all; I was too busy."

"O dear! what *can* you have been doing. Was it all the lawyers?"

"Go to bed, my child, and don't ask me any questions. You wouldn't understand if I answered them."

"But you will have something to eat now, Frank?"

"I can't eat, thank you; my head is splitting."

"O! I *hate* law," cries Clare. "Why can't the men bring their papers down here, instead of your going to them. And if it's anything to do with Brodhurst Hall, I suppose I shall have to be martyrised too, by-and-by."

"Yes, you'll hear all about it by-and-by. Meanwhile, be thankful there is no necessity for your knowing it. I wish there were none for me either. Here is Collins, Clare;

let her take you to your room. I am fairly beat, and can talk no more to-night."

And that is all the satisfaction Clare gets out of Iredell's visit to Bertha Rambeau.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE FRUIT AND FLOWERS.

 HE visit to Madame Rambeau has left Iredell in a very perplexed and unsettled condition. He is utterly unable to decide what to do for the best. He is grieved to think that she should be so near death without a friend who loves and trusts her to close her eyes, and he is glad that chance should have thrown in his way the opportunity of (in some measure) relieving her dire necessity; but his encounter with his former flame has had no other effect whatsoever upon him.

Had it been so, had the faintest spark of the old passion flickered in the distance as he gazed into her sunken eyes, Iredell

would have read the warning, and not again approached her. But it is the complete absence of all sentiment in his mind concerning Bertha Rambeau that makes him doubtful how to act respecting her in the future.

He hates deceiving Clare, yet common humanity seems to call him to the other woman's dying bed. Of course the easiest plan of all would have been to make a clean breast to his wife, but, as has been said before, there were reasons to close such a course of action to him.

Besides, women are "feckle cattle" to manage, and the Heaven that made them alone knows in what mood they may take to-day, a matter at which they would have smiled but yesterday. Men have often no harder judges than the women that love them. The sexes possess so little mutual understanding that they are no more fit to enter into each other's feelings than a fowl

to comprehend why an eagle cannot live upon the ground, or the king of birds why a hen should be content with picking up grain. The difference between their ages also makes Iredell feel as though it would be almost beneath him to ask for counsel which he may not be able to follow; for were Clare decidedly to set her face against his visiting Madame Rambeau again, and that unfortunate creature, on the other hand, cried out to him to come and receive her last sigh, he knows that he should do what he considered right without any deference to his wife's tears, reproaches, or hysterics.

Still, so little does he relish the task he has undertaken, that he lets the day on which he said he would return to London pass by without making an effort to do so, relying on the doctor's promise to let him hear if any change takes place for the worse. The result of his defalcation is, however,

that on the third day another of those blurred and tremblingly written notes comes up for him from the barracks, in which poor Bertha begs him to see her again before she becomes too weak to make a communication to him that is of the utmost importance. Urged by the nature of this communication he determines to fulfil the promise he has made; but he looks very crestfallen as he walks into Clare's room after breakfast, and informs her that business must again take him up to London.

"And for the whole day?" cries Clare, in a tone of disappointment. "O! Frank, I wish the lawyers had chosen any other time for their horrid business. It *is* so provoking, isn't it?"

"It is infinitely provoking, Clare."

"It *is* law, isn't it, Frank?" wistfully.

"Well, not exactly, dear; but it's business, strictly."

"Anything to do with the regiment?"

"No; my own private affairs."

"I suppose you *must* go, Frank?"

"I *must* go, darling; it is quite necessary."

"Then I will try not to be silly and fret after you. You will come back as soon as you can, I know."

"I will come back the very first moment I am set at liberty."

"Well, I daresay Mrs. Seymour will look in."

"I daresay she will. I wish it were Mrs. Treherne instead, though."

"I wish it were to be *both*," replies Clare, evasively.

She has already begun to think that Mrs. Treherne might not prove quite such an amusing companion as Mrs. Seymour. Addy has been very discreet. She has only called once since Iredell's return, and that when she knew he would be in barracks.

She has no present intention of fanning the flame blown into life by Lady Brodhurst's breath. Her rôle now is to lull all suspicions in the wife's mind regarding her former flirtations with the husband, until she shall have gained a firm footing in the house, and be able to renew her attacks upon him. Not that Addy Seymour is the least degree in love with Iredell. Bless you, no! She *may* have been in the times gone by; that concerns neither my readers nor my story; but her present desire to evoke a sentimental feeling in his breast for her, is solely born of the vice which makes ninety-nine women out of a hundred run after unlawful prey—vanity! Mrs. Seymour has no spite against Clare. She does not wish nor intend to break that poor little girl's heart if it can possibly be avoided. All she wants is that Woolwich should see and say that Colonel Iredell is so much in love with Mrs. Seymour that

he doesn't know what to do. Then Addy would be in her glory. She would trot him out at evening parties, and have him to dance attendance on her and turn over her music leaves, instead of Spooney Allingham, whilst she would heave heart-breaking sighs, and glance up into his face whenever a particularly tender passage occurred in her song.

This—with an occasional stolen interview, when they would both look unutterable things and make broken allusions to Fate and the unforgotten past—is all that she really requires of Clare's husband. She has no thought of making herself seriously talked about, or an open scandal in the garrison.

She is only like ten thousand other flirts, who would barter soul and body to gratify their self-conceit, and keep up the reputation of being irresistible, yet would shrink from resigning a single domestic

comfort in order to indulge an honest and legitimate affection. To such women the game loses all its zest directly it is legal. Their victims must be—or profess to be—in despair, or they are worth nothing to them.

Addy's admirers have been rather falling off of late years. Her hair is too evidently dyed, the pearl powder is too thick upon her face, and the carmine upon her lips, to take in any one except such young hands as Spooney Allingham, who in his honest boyish admiration would not believe her charms were meretricious, even if he saw her lay them on. Iredell's frequent absences from the garrison during his engagement to Clare, and his avoidance of Woolwich society, had rendered any attempt at a renewal of their former relations difficult to her, but when he settled down in the very midst of them, and commenced to keep open house, Addy

seemed to see the way open. With Iredell himself and with Lady Brodhurst she has failed, but by the providential removal of the last-named dear saint to Heaven, and a little tact, she hopes to retrieve her character with Clare. And it will be strange if such a hardened woman of the world does not prove a match for the innocent trusting girl she has taken in hand. Addy Seymour is all smooth and pleasant at present; the cat has her claws sheathed; and if things go as she intends they shall go, and Iredell prove amenable, and Brodhurst Hall throw its doors open to her as the cottage at Woolwich has done, all will doubtless be smooth to the end—that is to say, until poor Clare's eyes are opened to the treachery of her so-called friend. But should Iredell treat her to any more of his lectures—and Addy has not yet forgiven him for the last—a desire for revenge may take the place of her present

feelings ; and revenge for her mortified vanity with Mrs. Seymour means attaining her end with the most utter disregard of the happiness of any one who may interfere with it.

But for the nonce pussy has no need to do more than purr and be amiable. She comes sneaking into Clare's room on the second day of Iredell's absence—sneaking is the only term by which to express the velvet tread and touch with which Addy Seymour indulges her friends in her conciliatory moments—with a face ready set for condolence.

"My poor dear ! I knew you would be alone again, for I just met Colonel Iredell on his way to the station with a basket of such splendid flowers and fruit. Perfect pictures ! I suppose he had got them from Biggins. I have often heard him say that Biggins's fruit is better than any you can get in town."

"I have no doubt he had," replies Clare, "for all my fruit and flowers come from there. But why didn't he send them home at once, I wonder?"

"I fancy he was taking them to town with him, dear. I met him in the station. I go there every morning for my papers, and he was in such a hurry to catch the train he couldn't even stop to speak to me."

"But why should he take them to town, Mrs. Seymour, only to bring them back again? That would be too stupid, surely."

"He may be taking them to a friend."

"O, no!" cries Clare, decidedly; "he has gone up on business; besides, Frank has no friends in London to whom he would take flowers and fruit."

"What! no ladies?"

"Certainly not."

"My dear girl! you must let me laugh a little, but you are so dreadfully innocent,

Do you really and truly suppose that Colonel Iredell has made you acquainted with the names of all the—well, we wont say ladies, but the females he has been intimate with before you married him?"

"O, no ! of course not—but now——"

"Now, you think *because* he is married he must necessarily have cut them all. Ah, my dear ! men are very different from what you imagine them to be."

"I don't think I am so very innocent, Mrs. Seymour—by which I know, of course, you mean ignorant. I am aware men have many acquaintances as bachelors that they would not introduce to their wives. Frank told me a great deal more than I could repeat to you about that before we were married ; but whatever others may do, I am sure my husband would never visit anybody now to whose house he could not take me!"

"Well, dear, it's a very happy belief. I

wish I could think the same of my husband."

"But surely you do not suspect Mr. Seymour——"

Addy bursts into a merry laugh, which sounds very strange to Clare, considering the subject.

"Of no more, my dear, than any other husband. Indeed, my good steady old Henry is better than the generality; I am quite convinced of that. Yet when he has been out by himself I should no more think of teasing him to tell me where he has been, or whom he has seen, than I should think of flying. It wouldn't be fair. It would only worry him, dear old soul, and perhaps make him tell me a fib, whilst as for myself I would infinitely rather be left in the dark than hear of his little peccadilloes."

"But perhaps—indeed, it is most likely, he would have nothing to conceal!"

"Then where's the use of worrying him, dear? 'Leave them alone and they'll come home, and bring their tails behind them.' That's my plan with men, and I'm sure it's a wise one."

"Frank and I have never gone on that plan," says Clare, seriously. "He began by telling me that if we were to have any happiness together we must have no concealments, and that I was to confide in him in everything—good, bad, and indifferent; and he has never been tired of, or vexed by, hearing me."

"Ah, true! He told *you* to confide in *him*. Men expect that sort of thing from their wives, naturally. But for him to tell you all his little private thoughts, plans, or actions, that would be quite another thing —wouldn't it?"

"I don't see why it should! He knows I would never raise an objection to any wish of his."

"Ah, my dear! wait till you hear what the wish may be! You've only been married a few months, remember! I've seen couples that began the world together like two turtle-doves divorced before a few years were over their heads. Then nothing sickens men so soon as want of variety."

"But that's a dreadful prospect for people who marry young, and may have to live to old age together."

"All the worse for them unless they grow wise in time. I know a charming Irish lady, who has the most devoted husband in the world. I asked her once how she managed to keep him so constant. Her answer was, 'By letting him be as inconstant as he chooses. My husband is the greatest flirt in creation, and I never interfere with his flirtations. Each fresh woman he meets he falls in love with. I let him fall in love, and make love as long as he

chooses, or the lady will permit, and I always find he comes back to me with renewed zest. An absence of a couple of months renders me quite a novelty in his eyes, and he makes love to me as ardently as though I were a stranger. That is my only secret. Blind eyes and an elastic tether make the most faithful husbands in the universe.' "

"But she couldn't have loved him," exclaims Clare, with wide-open, startled eyes.

"O! my dear, if you're going in for sentiment you'll soon come to smash. It's all very well for the honeymoon, but believe me it wont do for married life. It tires a man out when it comes from his wife. He soon gets sick of kisses and sweet words and languishing looks. Don't you know that men are the most unreasonable creatures possible, and never care for that which gives them no trouble to secure? It's like

shooting the bird that walks up the gun—where's the excitement? Nowhere!"

"Frank doesn't care for excitement, and all that sort of nonsense," says Clare, almost ready to cry with vexation. "He says he's had enough of that to last a lifetime, and all he desires now is a happy quiet home with me. He dislikes even going out to parties, and would not do so except for the fear of seeming rude. He says it's so much trouble!"

"More trouble than going up to London?" remarks Mrs. Seymour, significantly.

"O! he hates that too, but he is obliged to go on business! It is certainly strange about the basket of fruit and flowers, but I will ask him who they were for directly he returns home, and I am sure he will tell me."

"I wouldn't ask him if I were you. It may not be distrust, but it will look like it."

"*Of course* it is not distrust. I would trust him anywhere, and with anybody."

"Then take my advice, dear, and don't bother him on the subject. Perfect faith requires no proof to aid its credulity. Only I wish you would learn to look at the sex—not Colonel Iredell in particular, but all men—in their true light. It will be much happier for you in the end."

"I don't understand you!"

"Don't judge them by ourselves, my dear, for they are as different from us as chalk from cheese, especially men who have seen what is termed *the world*, which means the worst part of it, and the worst people in it. There's an old saying that you can't be satisfied with milk after brandy, and it is the case with them. Matrimony—even with such a pretty creature as yourself—is a very dull sort of business after the life they have been accustomed to lead; and if wives rein them in too tight, and frown each time they

leave their side for a little relaxation, why they kick over the traces, that's all."

"What do you mean by kicking over the traces?"

"Taking French leave, my dear, and going after their own pleasures without even having the grace to ask permission. Now, for instance, look at your husband—as good a fellow as ever stepped, and perfectly worshipping you. But what a change it must be for him after the life he has led to be cooped up in this house, day after day, with you chained to the sofa. Of course he adores you so much at present that he doesn't mind it, perhaps; but what will it be a few years hence if the same sort of thing happens over again?"

"I often urge him to go out," says Clare; "I am constantly begging him to leave me, and dine at the mess or with some of his old friends, but he declares he would rather be at home."

"O! Colonel Iredell is an awfully kind-hearted fellow, there's no doubt of that. He always was."

"Do you think it must be a very great bore to him, then, to stay with me? Of course, I know I am not his equal in experience or understanding, but he is with the other officers of the regiment almost all the day, and in the evening he seems to care more for rest and quiet than anything else."

"I have no doubt he does," replies Mrs. Seymour; "he has plenty of time for his own amusements without grudging you a few hours then."

"Do you know," says Clare, after a pause, "that some of the things you have just said remind me so much of poor dear mamma. She had, what I used to consider, a very hard opinion of men, but I suppose she was right after all."

"You may depend on it she was,"

exclaims Addy, eagerly. "Your dear mother—little as I saw of her—struck me as being pre-eminently a woman of the world, by which I mean a woman who knew the world and its wickedness better than most."

"Yet she lived a very happy domestic life with my father. I remember her telling me, just before I married Frank, that they had never quarrelled together."

"Who *could* quarrel with such an angel? But still dear Lady Brodhurst moved in very high circles and a varied society, and could not have passed through the world—clever creature as she was!—with gaining vast experience as to its ways. I daresay she told you, dear, that all is not gold that glitters?"

"She tried to convince me of it, but I would never listen to a word against Frank, even from her."

"Of course not; but men, unfortunately, are but too much alike in one particular."

"And that is——"

"Hoodwinking their wives, my dear, or trying to do so. The men who only try to do so get into hot water, and lead a cat-and-dog life at home; the men who succeed are those who go through life with the reputation of being model husbands."

"O! I could not bear to have such an opinion of them. It seems too terrible. People who ought to have but one heart and mind, only living to deceive and trick one another. If I thought it could be true, Mrs. Seymour, I'd——"

"What would you do, dear?"

"Kill myself, I think! I don't believe I could live under such a miserable knowledge."

"You would be much more likely to take to flirting yourself."

"I should never do *that*, I hope. Even

despair would be better than *that*," replies Clare, with dignity.

Addy Seymour bursts out laughing.

"My dear child, one would imagine that flirting was a mortal sin! You've no cause to think of it now, and never may have; but should you ever need it, remember, there is no such cure for a husband's indifference as a little wholesome jealousy. It's wonderful how it brings them back to reason. Cæsar may play all sorts of pranks himself, but 'the wife of Cæsar must not be suspected.' Like the child who doesn't care how much he tortures the kitten, it is not a bad plan sometimes to let them feel what pain is for themselves."

"I should consider a woman lowered herself to the man's level by trying it," says Clare.

"Ah, my dear! your honeymoon has scarcely waned yet. Don't holloa till

you're out of the wood. You've got an excellent husband, and thank Heaven for it; but don't give him too much liberty. It's good for neither man nor beast."

"I should never dream of interfering with any of Frank's actions, even if he would allow me to do so," replies Clare, though with less assurance than she affects.

For when Addy Seymour has departed, she cannot help mentally reviewing the conversation that has passed between them, and comparing it with some she held with her dead mother. There is a great similarity between them. Mrs. Seymour certainly speaks with an amount of vivacious slang that Lady Brodhurst would have scorned to use, but the gist of their discourse is ,the same. They appear to have an equal want of faith in the fidelity of men to women, and to consider that a happy and holy married love can have little influence

over them in comparison with the reckless pleasures they have left behind.

Clare—lying there on her sofa alone, and wondering for whom Frank can have procured the fruit and flowers—thinks of some of her mother's warnings to her, and shudders at them. The words had little weight at the moment they were uttered, but now coming, as they seem to do, from the lips of the dead, they ring with mournful exactness upon the young wife's ears.

“Everybody told you what this man was. From the hour he was introduced to you, you cannot say you have been unaware of the character he bears, and has borne for the last ten years. You know that if he has been concerned in one scrape with women he has in a dozen—that he has a name for trifling and flirtation throughout the country, and is as well known in every garrison town in England as the regiment itself. He is about as little likely to make

a good husband as any one you have seen, and yet in spite of all this, you choose to accept his offer of marriage, and to run the risk of making yourself miserable for life."

Clara distinctly remembers the feelings with which she listened to this tirade on the part of her mother—the angry, indignant feelings—and the red flush that rises to her face as she recalls it, seems to betoken that the memory is not much more agreeable to her than the reality had been. She may have gained more faith in Lady Brodhurst's opinions, but as yet she has lost none in her husband.

"O! forgive me, mother!" she thinks, "if I cannot but believe that you were mistaken in your estimate of him. He may have been all you said, but he will never let me feel the effects of it now. He is too generous and noble and kind-hearted—my darling Frank. He would kill himself sooner than deceive me, who am left now

so completely dependent on him for love and help. If I mistrusted my husband, I should mistrust Heaven! There would be nothing left for me to lean upon or love. The whole world would become utterly dark and empty."

Yet though Clare loves Iredell with her whole soul, and neither distrusts nor suspects him, the effect which Addy Seymour's idle talk has left upon her mind is to make her so low spirited that she spends the better part of the day in tears.





CHAPTER IX.

"BERTHA'S CHARGE."

MEANWHILE, Iredell, little aware of the mischief brewing against him at home, is making his way to Bertha Rambeau. As he passes the shop of the fruiterer Biggins, he sees some remarkably fine hothouse grapes and peaches which he thinks would be acceptable to an invalid. One generally takes a sick friend some little trifle, and it is without any feeling whatever of romance attached to the action that he walks in and orders the fruiterer to put him up a basket to take to town. Biggins knows the Colonel well. He is an old customer of his, and he feels he can take liberties with him.

"For a lady, I suppose, Colonel? Shall I put up a few flowers amongst the fruit to set it off?"

"Just as you like," says Iredell, indifferently.

Upon which leave Biggins produces some of his choicest blossoms, and makes up a basket that will cause a difference of several sovereigns in Iredell's Christmas bill.

He has hardly looked at it, so engrossed is he with his own thoughts, when he encounters Addy Seymour at the railway station. She is making her way up to him, but with a careless nod he hurries past her, and crosses the platform to await the arrival of the up-train to London. He feels even less kindly disposed towards Mrs. Seymour than usual, now that he finds she is endeavouring to work herself into the good graces of his wife; and if, without insulting, he could so far offend her as to prevent her ever entering his

house again, he would do it without scruple. There is a prophecy of coming evil in her painted face for him now, which he never saw there before, and he quite longs for the time when they shall leave Woolwich and lose sight of it (as he trusts) for ever. He is very silent and abstracted on his journey up to London. Two or three officers from the garrison travel in the same carriage with him, but they are unable to draw him into general conversation. On leaving the train a Captain Luttrell asks him his destination, adding that he is going to Ladbrook Gardens himself, to see his wife, who is with her mother there, and will give him a lift in his cab if it will be of any use.

Iredell thanks him and declines the offer, though a moment after he hails a Hansom to carry him in exactly the same direction. As he passes through Westbourne Grove, there is as usual a block before the shop of

the world-renowned Whiteley, and his cab draws up alongside of Captain Luttrell's. The latter sees him, nods and smiles. Iredell is vexed at the recognition, he hardly knows why, but his conscience is uneasy, and every molehill appears a mountain to him. He is almost ready to think harsher things than are necessary of the dying creature he is hastening to, and to question if he is not exceeding even the claims of humanity, by risking anything for a woman who so shamefully deceived him. Strange to say, his feelings are less kind towards poor Bertha to-day than they were on the occasion of his first visit to her. Then, perhaps, if the recollection of the past agony was very poignant, so was the remembrance of the past affection, which gave rise to it.

Two days' cooler reflection at home, combined with the contemplation of his wife's true love for him, have taken him

back to a remoter and juster estimate of Madame Rambeau's character. He still pities and is desirous to relieve her, but more for what she is than for what she has been. If he ever thought in his most private moments that he cherished the least atom of regret for her infidelity to him, his interview with her has dispelled it.

He is not so much obliged to check any lingering romance which may unduly cling to the memory of Bertha Loring, as to stamp down the feelings of contempt which it seems ungenerous and unmanly to preserve towards a dying woman. Yet he knows he has an expiation to make as well as Bertha, and that he has great reason to be thankful that, so far, his lot is happier than hers. The expiation—sooner or later—will have to be paid; but he little dreams at that moment the frightful guise under which it will come to him, nor the

bitter harvest of tears he must yet reap for the reckless sowing of his youth.

As he knocks at the door of her apartments, it is opened to him by the nurse, Mrs. Bond.

"I hope your patient is better, nurse," he says.

"No, sir, and she never will be. I thought she would have gone twenty times last night. She was delirious, too, after she wrote the note to you; but her head is quite clear this afternoon."

"Does she expect to see me?"

"O yes, sir! She's been looking out for you anxiously ever since the morning."

"I could not come sooner."

He disencumbers himself of his hat and stick as he speaks, and follows Mrs. Bond to the upper storey.

Bertha is in bed, watching with feverish eager eyes for the opening of the door. She seizes Iredell's hand, and would have

drawn him down towards her, but he stands erect and shakes her hand only.

"I am sorry to hear you have passed such a bad night," he says, gently.

"O ! I was so ill—I never thought I should live to see the morning, or to speak to you again."

"Well now, ma'am, that your friend has come, perhaps you wont mind my running round to my last lady's to fetch a few aprons and things I left behind me there? I shan't be gone more than half an hour."

"Are you sure Madame Rambeau will not want you?" demands Iredell, rather alarmed at the prospect of being left alone with her.

"No, sir ; she's just had her lunch, and wont require anything, except it's a little drink," replies the nurse.

"And I want to speak to you alone—alone," says Bertha, eagerly.

"Very well then, Mrs. Bond, let it be as

you propose, but don't be longer than you can possibly help," acquiesces Iredell.

"I'll be back again in twenty minutes," says the nurse, mendaciously, and leaves them to themselves.

"Frank! you have ceased to love me," exclaims Bertha, as soon as they are alone.

"Why vex yourself and me by such an assertion, Bertha? Why think of the past at all? Surely you have enough trouble in the present to occupy you."

"But tell me the truth—I would rather hear it. Have you any remnant of affection left for me?"

"I pity you greatly—you must know that."

"But that is no answer to my question. Do you love me at all—the least bit?"

"No, Bertha! I do not think I do. It is hard to tell you so, but you have forced it from me."

She gives a deep sigh, and throws her

head back on her pillow, gazing with weary eyes (into which a hopeless expression seems to have wandered) into vacancy.

"Bertha! I wish you had not asked me that question, for I owe it to myself (and one other) not to tell a falsehood about it, even to please you. You know that I *did* love you—fondly, madly, if you will—and that when you left me, I was nearly bereft of my senses. But I stamped down my pain and disappointment with a heel of iron. I left the country where I had been so happy and so miserable, and went to foreign lands, where nothing could remind me of my loss. I sought every distraction in my power. I avoided everything that could recall you to my memory. I never thought of you or the past, if it were possible, by any means, right or wrong, to drive the thought away. And so at last I succeeded in killing all love or care for you.

I made myself see you as you were—not as I had imagined you to be—and the victory was won. My passion was dead. There was nothing left in it beautiful or to be desired. It was a putrid corpse I gazed on, not a fresh, living affection—and so I continued to feel it to be, until the day I received the letter to say that you were dying. Then pity took the place of every other feeling, and so it is now. I have only pity and grief to give you, Bertha. For God's sake do not ask me for any more."

"I have no right to expect even those," she murmurs. "There is no other man in the world would have given them to me but yourself. But how far will they go?"

"They will go to the utmost limits of friendship for the sake of *what has been*," exclaims Iredell. "Bertha! if you have anything on your mind—if there is anything you want procured or done—now or

after your death—trust to me, and I will do it.”

“I will trust you!” she cries, feebly.
“O, Frank! you are so noble and so good. Would to Heaven I had always seen you as I see you now!”

“What is it I am to do for you?” he asks, wishing to divert her attention from the contemplation of his own merits.

“In order to explain, I must revert to my past history; but how can I speak of it to you?”

“It will not pain me to listen. Pray go on.”

“When I fled with Rambeau,” she begins, with a conscious face, and many pauses for breath and resolution to proceed, “I thought he had plenty of money. He had told me so. But after a year in Paris, I found that we had been living on the little capital he possessed, and that we were penniless. It was quite imperative that we

should work to gain our bread, and with that intent we came to England. M. Rambeau soon obtained employment in some house of business, which used to take him away from England, to Spain and other countries, sometimes for months together. On the occasion of one of these absences I was in great distress for want of money. I had not long become a mother—ah! my poor baby!"

She sinks back half-fainting, and Iredell is obliged to get a cordial, which is close at hand, and administer some of it to her before she can proceed. Meanwhile his face looks stern enough. The history of M. Rambeau's offspring does not interest him.

"Thank you, Frank! Don't let me die before I have told you all. I had no money to support the child or myself. Rambeau sent me no remittances. We were both starving. So I put my little

girl out to nurse, and accepted the situation of maid or travelling companion to a lady going abroad."

"My poor girl! You have had to eat dirt, indeed."

"Don't pity me—not in that voice—or I shall never be able to go on. I was on the Continent much longer than I expected to be. The lady I travelled with was taken ill at Genoa, and I was not home again for a twelvemonth. My child had been placed with an illiterate old woman at Clapham, but I had received news of her, regularly at first, through the kindness of a Sister of Mercy who wrote the letters. Latterly, however, the communication had ceased, and I was very anxious about my baby. When I reached England again, my first act was to go to Clapham, where I found to my horror and amazement that the child was gone."

"She had died in your absence?"

"No, no! She is alive now for what I know to the contrary. It is the fear that she may be alive that is torturing my last hours. The cottage where I had left the baby was occupied by new tenants; the old woman had died months before; no one knew the name of the Sister of Mercy; the child had been taken to the Union."

"You made inquiries there, of course?"

"Yes! but without any effect. The guardians met, and there was a great fuss made about it. The old woman's death had been very sudden, and she had been buried at the parish expense. The baby had been found in her cottage—no one knew its name, or to whom it belonged; so it was taken to the workhouse, and entered as 'Mary Brown' upon the books. All this had happened six months before. A few weeks after the child's admission, some respectable people, who gave the name of Wilson, had called and claimed the baby as

their niece. They had produced letters and receipted bills to prove the little girl had been placed by their sister with the old nurse from its birth, and would have been reclaimed before but for its mother's death. The parish authorities were quite ready to give up the child, and the Wilsons carried it off with them.”

“What on earth should people want with a child that was not their own?”

“Perhaps they thought it was the right one. They could have had no other motive in taking it away. But I have never seen it since.”

“What steps did you take for its recovery?”

“What steps could I take, without money or friends or help? I inquired all over Clapham, and I looked up every family of the name of Wilson I could find, but it was of no use.”

"Poor Bertha! you did not need any extra trouble."

"I was frantic at first, but after awhile my agony grew less. Perhaps she is better off than she would ever have been with me. I have never seen nor heard of M. Rambeau since. He has quite deserted me, and I believe has settled in America. So the poor child would have been thrown on the world after all. But I cannot die in peace for the thought of what she may become. O, Frank! I deceived and injured you, and I am not worthy of your least regard, but if you ever loved me, save my child!"

"What can I do for her, Bertha? Only tell me your wishes, and I have already promised to carry them out to the best of my ability."

"I would say—'Bring my child to me before I die,' but I know that is impossible."

"I am afraid it is."

"But seek for her after I am gone, Frank, and do not abandon the search until you have found her, and are assured she is being brought up in the right way. Don't let her become what I am. Don't let her end as I have. Don't let her die as I am dying."

"If it is in my power to prevent it, I will not."

"Do you swear to me, Frank?"

"I swear to you, Birdie! I will use every effort to discover the whereabouts of your daughter, and to see that she is honourably and religiously brought up. I will look upon my oath as a sacred duty imposed on me by Heaven, and a privilege permitted to me as some slight restitution for the grievous wrong I did you."

"You never wronged me," she murmurs.
"Would to God the sin you shared were the only one I had to answer for!"

"You must now tell me all you can con-

cerning your child, in order that I may fulfil the promise I have made you. What is her name?"

" Louise Bertha Rambeau. She was baptised at the church of St. Mary-le-Strand."

" What is her age?"

" If she is alive, she will be six years old next February."

Iredell then proceeds to note down the name and address of the old woman who had charge of the child at Clapham, the date of her admission to the Union, and every other incident that he considers necessary and Bertha's enfeebled memory can afford him.

When his inquiries are exhausted, he closes his note book and replaces it in his pocket.

" As far as you can, let your mind be at rest upon this subject, Bertha. I will set the proper authorities at work, and make every effort to discover the persons who

adopted your child. When I find them I will undertake to see that Louise shall be brought up in a manner befitting her station and your wishes. But there is one point you must not lose sight of"—and at this juncture Iredell's voice is not so tender as before—"a father has the first claim to his child ; and should M. Rambeau interpose his authority regarding her, I can have nothing to do in common with him. I undertake this duty for your sake, not his, and his interference must be the signal for my relinquishing it."

"He will never interfere ; I doubt if he knows of her existence. I wrote and told him of her birth, but I received no answer, and perhaps the letter never reached him ; he was in Sardinia at the time. At all events, he never noticed it."

"Let us talk of something else," says Iredell, on whom the mention of M. Rambeau acts as a red rag on a bull.

But further conversation is interrupted by the return of Mrs. Bond, who enters the room flustered and breathless, with a long story of having missed the omnibus and had to walk all the distance between the two houses.

"And it's a good step between Ladbroke Grove and this part of Notting Hill, too," she continues; "but I found my lady getting on so beautifully, with the colour of a rose in her face, and she's had her good gentleman up to see her to-day into the bargain; so we were quite a family party, as you may say. And my lady asked so many questions about you, ma'am, and was so interested to hear of your illness, that she was actually going to send you a bunch of beautiful flowers her husband had just given her, until I told her the Colonel had brought you some already."

"What was the matter with her?" demands Bertha, with that interest which

every invalid takes in the illness of another.

"What was the matter with her? A very common complaint, ma'am—a good big boy, that's what was the matter with her. She's a country lady, but she made a mistake about the time, and was taken ill whilst she was staying with her mamma; so that's how I was called in to nurse her. But Captain Luttrell was up there himself this afternoon, and I expect it wont be many days now before he takes her home with him."

"What name did you say?" asks Iredell, quickly.

"Captain Luttrell, sir. He comes from Woolwich. I think his lady told me he belongs to a line regiment down there. A fine-looking gentleman as ever stepped, with blue eyes and a caroty beard; and the baby's as like him as two peas."

Iredell finds it is time to go. He has no

intention of again leaving Clare alone until midnight. Bertha's wistful looks implore him to remain, but he is gently resolute. He again impresses on the nurse the necessity of giving every care and attention to her patient, and of letting him know by telegram should his presence become imminently necessary.

"I suppose we are to look to you for the funeral, sir?" she says, with business-like coolness.

"I have already written to the doctor on that subject, and he will see that everything is arranged as it should be. It is of no use sending for me, nurse, you will understand, unless I am absolutely required. I am no relation of Madame Rambeau's, and am only acting in the absence of her friends. If I can be of use I will come; otherwise I have no time to waste on needless journeys."

"Well, I may be mistaken, but it's my

belief, Colonel, that when she goes it will be very sudden, and before there's time to send for anybody. She is only hanging on to life by a thread now. I can see the fever coming back upon her already; and I shouldn't be surprised if it takes her off to-night."

"Ought she not to see a clergyman?" says Iredell. He is not the sort of man to suppose that a few prayers prayed over a departing soul can direct its course to Heaven; but there seems something very mournful to him in the idea that poor Bertha should leave this world without a word of hope breathed in her ear for that which is to come.

"The doctor did bring up Mr. Rollins, the clergyman, with him to see her yesterday, sir," replies the nurse; "as good a gentleman as ever stepped, but she wouldn't have nothing to say to him out of the common. She said *you* was her best friend

and comforter, sir, and she didn't want no others."

"Madame Rambeau makes too much of the little service I have been able to render her," says Iredell, not over pleased that Bertha's gratitude should be so publicly announced. "As I told you just now, I am only acting for her friends. Good afternoon!" and without further colloquy he takes his way to the railway station. But his mind reverts with an unpleasant misgiving to the fact of the loquacious nurse being acquainted with Mrs. Luttrell, who in a few days will be reinstated in her Woolwich home.

It is one of those unfortunate coincidences that will occur in this world, and that lie at the bottom of almost all the mischief that is bred in it. For of all classes of servants, commend one to the sick and monthly nurse for carrying tittle-tattle, that neither concerns her nor her listeners, from house to

house. The tribe may have improved in morals and appearance since the days in which Dickens immortalised it by drawing Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig, but it talks none the less. The stories that are related in a sick-room, ostensibly for the amusement of the invalid, of the sayings and doings, the quarrels, infidelities, and domestic arrangements of the various households the nurse has visited during the last twelve months, ought at least to warn the patients what they may expect when their doubtful blessing is drafted on to their next-door neighbour. These women, who ought to be chosen from the most prudent and circumspect of their sex, and are, on the contrary, generally noted for their garrulity and familiarity, come into a family circle at the very time when the members of it are least upon their guard. Sickness, and perhaps death, is in their midst. Old scores are made up, old injuries repented of.

Tenderness, forgiveness, and repentance form the order of the day; and if ever the breasts of both the sick and the healthy are laid bare it is whilst lying on the pillow from which they may never rise again, or hanging over that which will so soon be empty. And, as a rule, the sick-nurse, whose presence is so important, is made a witness to it all. She hears the faults confessed, the pardon asked, the old sore alluded to, the quarrel made up; and that not always by the dying, but by those who recover and walk about the world again, forgetful of the weakness into which they have been betrayed. But the nurse does not forget it.

That little secret that Mr. Simple whispered to his wife; the infidelity he confessed and asked her pardon for, when the doctor had warned him it was possible his illness might prove fatal, makes an excellent story wherewith to entertain his junior clerk,

young Green, whilst she is helping him to recover from his broken leg.

And pretty Mrs. Frivolous, when she is getting the better of having presented Mr. Frivolous with twins, shakes with laughter at hearing how old Mrs. Artful with her (supposed) dying breath confided to her son the awful intelligence that he was not what he supposed himself to be ; and, after having driven the young man from her bedside in a frenzy of grief, finding the next morning that she was in a fair way of recovery, denied every word that she had said the night before. Mrs. Frivolous repeats the story to her husband on the very first opportunity, and they draw their own conclusions as to whether old Mrs. Artful is more likely to have spoken the truth whilst well, or dying.

But Mrs. Frivolous appears to have forgotten that when she lay almost between life and death but a week before, and the

cold breath issued from her parted lips in sudden gasps, she called Henry to her bedside and told him all about her going to that masked ball during his absence and against his orders, and of the many lies she coined afterwards to cover her iniquity. Henry has kissed and forgiven her several times over since then, so that her mind is quite at rest on that score; and she can afford to laugh at old Mrs. Artful, and to forget that the next patient her nurse attends will laugh in her turn at the weapon she has placed in her husband's hands to distrust her word for the future.

. Nothing is sacred to the sick-nurse. No tears, no remorse, no repentance touch her soul to make it generously silent. She is only on the look-out for materials whereabouts to enliven the convalescence of her next employer, and she cares little what mischief she makes in the pursuit of her rôle as story-teller.

Iredell, though not what is termed a domestic man, knows as much as this, and feels uneasy as he wonders to what extent Mrs. Bond may have extracted information from Bertha respecting his acquaintance with her.

* * * * *

As he walks up thoughtfully from the Woolwich station to his own house, he has again to pass Biggins's shop, and remembering Clare, he turns in and makes another purchase of grapes, which a few minutes later he places, without comment, on her table. It is so usual a thing for him to bring home fruit for his wife. Clare notes the basket with glistening eyes. She felt certain in her own mind that Frank could only have brought fruit and flowers for her use; yet it seemed so strange that he should take them up to town with him, that she had almost worried herself into believing that Addy Seymour's conjecture

must be right, and the present was intended for some one else. She almost disengages herself from Iredell's embrace to exclaim—

“ But where are the flowers ?”

“ What flowers, dear ?”

“ The flowers you were carrying with the fruit. Mrs. Seymour said they were perfect pictures.”

“ Mrs. Seymour never saw them !”

“ O yes, she did, when she met you at the station this morning. But, Frank, why did you take them up to London with you ? I believe the flowers faded, you silly old goose, and you had to throw them away.”

Then he remembers the basket he took to Madame Rambeau, and wishes Mrs. Seymour—well, quite as low down as it would be possible to wish her to be.

“ Frank ! how red you are ! What is the matter ? Where are my flowers ?”

“ I didn't get you any flowers, Clare.

If I had known you wished for them I would, but I remembered your vases were full."

"But Addy Seymour said you had such lovely ones—especially geraniums. It's very late for geraniums, Frank! What did they cost?"

"I don't know; Biggins put them in."

"Then where *are* they? O! what a tiresome man you are not to tell me! Addy said you must be taking them up to some friend in London, but I knew better than that—I knew they were for me."

A sudden desire crosses Iredell's mind to tell her everything.

"Clare, these are not the same grapes I had this morning. Mrs. Seymour is right. I *was* taking that basket of fruit up to a friend—a dying friend, Clare!"

"Who is it? You never told me before," she answers, though not very cordially.

"Because there was no necessity for you

to know, my darling. But this poor creature is very, *very* ill, and very poor!"

" You said it was *law* took you to town," she says, reproachfully.

" No, Clare ! I said it was business—my private affairs—if you will remember."

" Well, I wish another time you'd tell me all about these things before you do them, Frank ; because, of course, if you go off on secret errands, people will talk. Addy Seymour was sure you were taking the flowers and fruit to some lady, but I told her you would never do such a thing without my knowledge. I should never believe in you again if you did—and said it was *business* too."

Her manner repels him : it is fretful and childish, and crushes his desire to repose confidence in her. She is not in the mood, he feels, to be generous towards an erring sister, or to rightly judge his motives for succouring Bertha Rambeau : he will put

off his confession to a more convenient period.

“I am much obliged to Mrs. Seymour,” he says, as he rises from his seat on her couch and walks away to the other end of the room, “for attempting to damage my character in my absence. If she would try and tinker up her own a little, it would be time better spent.”

“Now, don't be angry, Frank. I assure you she said nothing against you in particular; and as for damaging your character, you know I would not allow any one to do that before me. Tell me all about your sick friend,” Clare goes on, in a coaxing manner. “Did he like the fruit and flowers?”

“O yes! they were acceptable enough,” answers Iredell, carelessly, the wrong pronoun she has used determining him not to undeceive her; “but I would prefer you not pursuing the subject further, Clare. You

have made it unpleasant to me by your suspicions, and the less said about it the better."

The sudden temper, which is Iredell's chief fault, is on him now; and Clare knows by experience she must be silent. It passes almost as quickly as it gathered, and the evening is spent in affectionate intercourse; but no allusion is made to the subject under dispute.

Only Iredell has made up his mind to speak openly to Mrs. Seymour, and let her know what he thinks of her intimacy with his wife and her remarks upon himself.

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